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HORSEMEN FROM NOWHERE



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ABOUT THE BOOK

HORSEMEN FROM NOWHERE is a science-fiction story about the arrival on earth of mysterious rose-coloured "clouds" from deep space. Members of the Soviet Antarctic expedition are the first to meet them in a series of inexplicable events. The "clouds" are seen to be removing the Antarctic ice-cap and carrying it off into space. They are capable of reproducing any kind of atomic structure, and this goes for human beings as well. The heroes of the story meet their "counterparts", come upon a duplicated airliner, journey through a modelled city, and fight Gestapo policemen that have been reconstructed from the past by these same mysterious "clouds". Scientists are unable to explain why terrestrial life is being modelled. All attempts to contact the space beings fail. In the end, however, Soviet scientists penetrate the enigma of the rose clouds and establish contact with a highly developed extragalactic civilization.

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HORSEMEN FROM NOWHERE

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На английском языке

Part one

THE ROSE

CLOUD

Chapter I

A CATASTROPHE

The snow was fluffy and soft, not at all the compacted, sand-paper-like crystalline névé of the polar wastes. The Antarctic summer was mild, and the gay frost that tweaked the ears ever so slightly created an atmosphere of Sunday hiking back home in Moscow. Our thirty-five-ton snow tractor was gliding along at a marvelous clip, but in winter even the airplane skis could hardly tear away from the supercooled ice crystals. Vano was a skilled driver and didn't bother to put the brakes on even in the case of suspicious humps and bumps of ice.

"Take it easy, there, Vano," Zernov shouted from the navigator's cabin adjacent to the driver. "There might be crevasses."

"Where do you see cracks?" was Vano's mistrustful response, as he peered through dark glasses into the stream of blindingly brilliant light that flooded the cabin through the front window. "This isn't a road, this is a highway, the Rustaveli Boulevard in Tbilisi. You can take it from me, that's definite. Really, I mean it."

I climbed out of the radio-room and pulled down the retracted seat next to Vano. For some reason, I turned round to look at the desk in the salon where Tolya Dyachuk was doing some meteorological work. I shouldn't have.

"We are now witnessing the birth of a new kind of chauffeur," said Tolya with a disgusting giggle. And since I disdained to reply, he added: "Vanity is killing you, Yura. Aren't two specialities enough for you?"

Each of us in the expedition combined two, sometimes three, professions. Zernov, for example, was the glaciologist, but he could handle the work of geophysicist or seismologist as well. Tolya Dyachuk combined the duties of meteorologist, doctor and cook. Vano was the mechanic and driver of the huge tractor specially designed for work in polar regions; what is more, he could repair anything from a broken tractor tread to a temperamental electric hotplate. I was in charge of photography, movies and also the radio. What attracted me to Vano was not any desire to increase my range of specialities but his own love for this gigantic Kharkov tractor vehicle.

When I first saw it from the airplane as we were landing, it appeared to me like a red dragon from a fairy tale; but close up, with its metre-wide tractor tread jutting out and its enormous

square eyes—windows—gave the impression of a creature from another world. I had driven motor cars and heavy lorries and, with Vano's permission, had tried the tractor on the icy land floe near Mirny, but yesterday was windy and somber—I didn't risk it. But today was crystal clear.

"Let me take a try, Vano," I said, and didn't allow myself to look back. "Just for half an hour."

Vano was getting up when Zernov shouted:

"Come on now, no experiments in driving. You, Chokheli, are responsible for the running condition of the machine. You, Anokhin, put on your goggles."

There was nothing to do but comply. Zernov was chief and he was demanding and unyielding. Of course it was definitely dangerous without goggles to look into the myriads of scintillations produced by a cold sun on sheets of snow. Only near the horizon did it darken somewhat as the plateau merged with the smeared-out ultramarine of the sky. Nearby even the air sparkled white.

"Look over there to the left, Anokhin," Zernov continued. "The side window gives a better view. Nothing unusual?"

What I saw off to the left, at a distance of about fifty metres, was an absolutely vertical wall of ice. It was higher than any buildings I knew of. Even the New York skyscrapers would hardly have come up to its top fluffy edge. Brilliantly shining with all colours of the rainbow, it was like a ribbon of diamond dust. It was darker at the bottom where layers of packed snow

had already frozen into a darkish hard névé. Lower still, there was a break in the enormous thickness of ice, as if a gargantuan knife had sliced through it. Here it was bluish in the sunlight, like the sky reflected in a giant mirror. At the very bottom, however, the wind had built up a long two-metre high snowdrift—a nice fluffy fringe to match the same one way up at the top of the wall of ice. The wall extended on and on without end, tapering off in the distant snowy reaches of space. Only the mighty giants of fairy tales could, it seemed, have erected it here in this icy fastness to protect no one knew what from no one knew whom—a fortress of ice. Of course, ice in the Antarctic—no matter what its shapes and forms—could hardly impress anyone. Which is just what I said to Zernov, for I couldn't see what was so attractive to the glaciologist.

“A plateau of ice, Boris Arkadieievich. Perhaps a shelf glacier?”

“Old timer,” Zernov said ironically, hinting at my second trip to the South Pole. “Do you know what a shelf is? You don't? A shelf is a continental bar. A shelf glacier slides down into the ocean. Now this is not a glacial precipice and we are not in the ocean.” He was silent for a moment and then added thoughtfully. “Please, stop, Vano. Let's take a closer look. This is an interesting phenomenon. Put something on, boys, it's no place for light sweaters.”

Close up, the wall was still more beautiful. An unbelievably blue bar, a chunk of frozen sky cut off near the horizon. Zernov was silent. Either the magnificence of the spectacle awed him, or

its inexplicability. He peered for the longest time into the snowy line at the topmost fringe of the wall, and then for some reason looked down at his feet, stamped the snow, then kicked it about. We watched him but could not figure it out.

"Just look at this snow we are standing on," he said suddenly.

We stamped the snow a bit like he had done, and found a solid sheet of ice below the thin layer of snow.

"A real skating rink," said Dyachuk. "An ideal plane, probably Euclid himself helped to make it."

But Zernov was serious.

He continued thoughtfully, "We are standing on ice. There is not more than two centimetres of snow. Now look at the wall. Metres thick. Why? The climate here is the same, the same winds, the same conditions for accumulation of snow. Anyone got any bright ideas?"

Nobody answered. Zernov continued thinking aloud.

"The structure of the ice is apparently the same. The surface too. I get the impression of an artificial cut. And if you brush off the centimetre-thick layer of snow under foot, we get the same artificial cut. Now that doesn't make sense at all."

"Everything is nonsense in the realm of the snow queen," I put in for what it was worth.

"Why queen and not king?" Vano queried.

"You explain it to him, Tolya," I said, "you're the map specialist. We've got Queen Mary Land,

Queen Maud Land, and then in the other direction Queen Victoria Land."

"Simply Victoria," Tolya added correcting me.

"Listen, you erudite of Weather Forecasts, she was the Queen of England. Incidentally, in this same field of forecasting, wasn't it here on this wall that the snow queen played with Caius? And wasn't it here that he cut his cubes and fashioned them into the word 'eternity'?"

Dyachuk grew cautious, ready for a trap.

"Hey, who's this Caius guy?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I sighed, "why didn't Hans Christian Andersen deal in weather forecasts? Do you know the difference between you and him? The colour of the blood. His is blue."

"The octopus has blue blood if you want to know."

Zernov was not listening.

"Are we roughly in the same région?" he asked suddenly.

"What region, Boris Arkadievich?"

"Where the Americans observed those clouds."

"No, quite a bit to the west," put in Dyachuk. "I've checked by the map."

"I said 'roughly'. Clouds usually move, you know."

"Ducks too," wisecracked Tolya.

"You don't believe me, Dyachuk?"

"Of course not. It isn't even funny: clouds that are neither cumulus nor cirrus. Actually, there aren't any at all right now." He looked up at the open sky. "Perhaps orographic. They're lens-like in shape with an extra layer on top."

And rose-coloured due to the sunlight. But these are dense, a greasy rose colour and something like raspberry jelly. A lot lower than cumulus clouds, not exactly bags blown up by the wind, but something in the nature of uncontrolled dirigibles. Nonsense!"

These were obviously the mysterious rose-coloured clouds that the Americans at MacMurdo had radioed about. Clouds like rose dirigibles had passed over the island of Ross, were seen on Adélie Land and in the vicinity of the shelf glacier Shackleton, and an American pilot was reported to have collided with them some three hundred kilometres from Mirny. Kolya Samoilov received the radiogram that the American radio operator sent out: "I saw them myself, the devil take them. Racing along just like a Disney film."

At Mirny, on the whole, the men were very skeptical about the rose clouds and only a few took the thing seriously. George Bruk, chief merry maker, kept at the phlegmatic old-timer seismologist:

"Now you've surely heard of the flying saucers, haven't you?"

"Suppose I have."

"And about the banquet at MacMurdo?"

"So what?"

"Did you see the 'Life' reporter off to New York?"

"What are you getting at, anyway?"

"Well, rose-coloured ducks went along with him and all the sensational news too."

"Lay off, will you. You're getting to be a pain you know where."

George lay off with a smirk and set out for some other victim. He passed me up, considering perhaps that the chances of success were small. I was having lunch with glaciologist Zernov, who was only eight years my senior but was already a professor. Really, no matter how you look at it, to be a full doctor of science at thirty-six is something to envy, though these sciences did not seem so important to me—I'm closer to the humanities. I didn't believe they could mean so much to human progress. And I said as much to Zernov on one occasion.

His answer was: "You probably don't know how much snow and ice there is on the earth. Take the Antarctic alone: the ice cap here in winter covers up to twenty-two million square kilometres; add to that 11 million in the Arctic, then Greenland, and the coast of the Arctic Ocean. Then put in all the snow-topped peaks and glaciers; not counting all the rivers that freeze over in winter. How much will that come to? About one third of the land area of the globe. The ~~continent of ice~~ is twice that of Africa. Which is not so insignificant when it comes to human progress."

I swallowed all that ice and any condescending desire to learn anything during my stay here in Antarctica. But after that, Zernov took a kindly attitude towards me and on the day of the report of "rose clouds", at lunch; he invited me on a trip into the interior of the continent.

"Oh, a distance of three hundred kilometres or so," he added.

"What for?"

"We'd like to make a check on the American phenomenon. It's a highly unlikely thing; that's what everyone thinks. But still it's something to look into. For you in particular. You will use coloured film since the clouds are rose-coloured."

"That's nothing at all," I put in. "The most ordinary kind of optical effect."

"I don't know. I wouldn't want to refute it outright. The report states that the colour appears to be independent of any illumination. True, we could presume an admixture of some aerosole of terrestrial origin or, say, meteoritic dust from outer space. If you want to know, my interest lies elsewhere."

"And what's that?"

"The state of the ice in that area."

I didn't ask why at the time, but I recalled the matter when Zernov was thinking out loud near the mysterious wall of ice. He was obviously connecting the two phenomena.

In the tractor I moved up to Dyachuk's work desk.

"It's a puzzling wall and a definitely strange cut," I mused. "How did they do it, with a saw of some kind? But then where do the clouds come in?"

"Why do you insist on linking them up?" Tolya asked in surprise.

"It's not me, it's Zernov. Why did he recall the clouds when he was quite definitely thinking about the glacier?"

"You're just making things more complicated. The glacier is unusual, to say the least, but what has that to do with the clouds? The glacier doesn't generate them."

"But suppose it does."

"There is no suppose to it. Give me a hand here with the breakfast, if you have nothing better to do. What do you think, omelette out of egg powder or one of these tins?"

I didn't have time to answer. Something struck us with a terrible blow and we tumbled to the floor. "Are we really flying? From the mountain or into a crevasse?" was all I could think. That very second a terrific blow from the front struck the tractor and threw it backwards. I was tossed to the opposite wall. Something cold and heavy banged against my head, and I went out cold.

Chapter II

DUPLICATES

I came to, but in a way I did not regain consciousness because I continued to lie there without moving and with not even enough strength to open my eyes. Consciousness crept back slowly, or was it a sort of subconsciousness? Vague feelings, hazy sensations took hold of me, and my thoughts—which were just as indeterminate and nebulous—attempted to define them. I was weightless, and I appeared to be floating or sailing or hanging not even in the air but in empty space, in a kind of colourless tepid colloidal solution, thick and yet imperceptible at the same time. It penetrated into my pores, my eyes and mouth and filled my stomach and lungs, washing through my blood, or perhaps even took its place

and began to course through my body. A strange impression grasped me—that something invisible was peering intently at and through me, investigating with concentrated curiosity every blood vessel, every nerve fibre, down to the very cells of my brain. I did not experience either fear or pain, I slept and didn't, and dreamt incoherently and formlessly, yet at the same time I was positive that this was no dream at all.

When I finally regained consciousness, everything about me was just as bright and quiet as usual. I opened my eyes with great difficulty and with a sharp piercing pain in my temples. Right in front of me I saw a smooth, reddish tree-trunk tower upwards. Was this a Eucalyptus tree or a palm tree? Or perhaps a pine whose top I could not see. I could not turn my head. My hand hit upon something hard and cold, a stone perhaps. I pushed it and it rolled into the grass soundlessly. My eyes sought the green grass of the Moscow Zoo, but the colour was ochre instead. And from above, from the window or from the sky, came a brilliant stream of white light that suggested both a limitless expanse of snowy wastes and the blue brilliance of a wall of ice. Everything became clear at once.

Overcoming the pain, I got to my feet and then sat down to survey my surroundings. I recognized things now: the brownish lawn was simply the linoleum and the reddish pole was the foot of the table, and the stone that I pushed was my camera. It had probably hit me on the head when the vehicle plunged downwards. Where was Dyachuk? I called him, but no answer came. Zernov did not respond, neither did

Chokheli. The silence was more complete than that of a room in which you are working and where you can hear all kinds of sounds—the dropping of water, the squeaking of the floor, the tick-tock of a clock or the buzzing of a fly—this was a total silence where only my own voice could be heard. I brought my wrist-watch to my ear—it was going. And the time was twenty minutes after twelve.

With great effort I rose to my feet and, holding onto the wall, found my way to the navigator's seat. It was empty, even the gloves and binoculars had vanished from the desk and Zernov's fur jacket was not thrown over the back of the chair. Zernov's log book was absent. Vano had likewise disappeared together with mittens and jacket. I looked through the front window; the outside glass was bent inwards. Beyond I could see smooth diamond-like snow, as if there had not been any accident at all.

But my memory persisted and the headache I had was definitely real. In the mirror I could see caked blood on my forehead. I probed around a bit and found that the bone was all right, only the skin had been cut by the edge of the camera. This meant that something had indeed taken place. Maybe everybody was nearby in the snow? I looked in the drying room for the sky clamps: there were no skis. Also absent were the duraluminum emergency sleighs. All the jackets and caps, except mine, had vanished. I opened the door and jumped down onto the ice. It was bluish and bright under the slight layer of fluffy snow that the wind was blowing every which way. Zernov was right when he spoke of the

mysteriously thin layer of snow in the deep interior of the polar continent.

Of a sudden, everything became clear. Right next to our "Kharkovchanka" vehicle was another one, big and red and all covered with snow. It had obviously caught up with us from Mirny or was on its way to Mirny. And it had helped us out of our trouble. That was it. Our tractor had fallen into a crevasse: about ten metres from here I could see the tracks going downwards, then the dark opening of a well with a firn-like crust covering the crack. The boys from the other tractor had probably seen our fall, which most likely had been a lucky one in which we had got caught in the mouth of the fissure, and had pulled us and the machine out.

"Hello, there, anybody in the tractor?" I yelled and went around the front end.

There was not a single face in any one of the four windows and no voice at all. I began to study the other machine and found that our sister vehicle had exactly the same bent-in glass in the front window. Then I looked at the left-hand tread. Our machine had a clear-cut mark: one of the steel cleats had been welded on and therefore differed definitely from the others. Now this tread had the same tell-tale mark. These were no twins from the same factory but duplicates that repeated every single detail. Opening the door of the other machine, the duplicate, I trembled fearing the worst.

True enough. The entrance passage was empty, no skis, no sleighs, only my fur jacket hanging on the hook. My jacket, that was it: torn and with sewn-up left-hand sleeve, the fur worn off the

cuffs and two dark oily spots on the shoulder—I had once picked it up with oily fingers. I entered the cabin in haste and fell against the wall so as not to collapse, for my heart was about to stop.

On the floor, near the table, in a brown shirt and padded trousers, with face against the leg of the table and dried up blood on the forehead and one hand holding onto the camera was ME.

Was this a dream? I had not yet awakened? I was looking at myself by a second vision? I pinched the skin on my hand. It hurt. It was clear that I was awake and not sleeping. Well, then I must have gone crazy. But from books I had read I knew that mad people never realize they have gone mad. Then what is this all about? Hallucinations? A mirage? I touched the wall; it was real enough. That meant that I myself was not an apparition, a phantom lying consciousness at my own feet. Sheer madness. I recalled the words of the mysterious snow maiden. Then maybe, after all, there is a snow maiden, and miracles do happen, and phantom duplicates of people, and science is simply nonsense and self-consolation.

What was there to do? Should I run to the duplicate tractor and wait to go out of my mind completely? Then I recalled the dictum that if what you see contradicts the laws of nature, then you are to blame, you err and not nature. My fear disappeared, only confusion and anger remained. I even gave the lying man a kick. He moaned and opened his eyes. Then he rose on his elbow just as I had done and looked around with a dull gaze.

“Where is everybody?” he asked.

I did not recognize the voice—perhaps mine in a tape-recording. But he was really me, * this phantom, if he thought exactly the way I had when I regained consciousness!

"Where are they?" he repeated and then yelled "Tolya! Dyachuk!" No response. It had been the same with me.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," I answered.

"It seemed to me that the machine fell into a crevasse, and we must have been knocked about against some wall of ice. I fell... and then... everything fell. Or did it?"

He did not recognize me.

"Vano!" he cried, rising.

Then silence again. Everything that had occurred fifteen minutes ago was strangely being repeated. Reeling, he reached the navigator's room and touched the empty seat of the driver, then he went into the drying room, found—like I had—that there were no skis or sleighs and then remembered me and returned.

"Where are you from?" he asked peering at me more intently and suddenly leapt back covering his face with his hand. "This can't be! What's happening? Am I asleep?"

"That's exactly what I said... at first," I answered. I was no longer afraid.

He sat down on the porolone settee.

"Please excuse me, but you look exactly like me, in the mirror. Are you a spectre?"

"No, you can touch me and find out."

"But then who are you?"

"I'm Yuri Anokhin, the cameraman and radio operator of the expedition," I said firmly.

He jumped up.

"No, I am Yuri Anokhin, the cameraman and radio operator of the expedition," he cried out and sat down again.

Now both of us were silent, examining one another; one was calmer, for he knew a little bit more and had seen more; the other with a glint of madness in his eyes, repeating, perhaps, all my thoughts—those that had come to mind when I had first seen him. Yes, there were two men in this cabin breathing in the same heavy rhythm—two identical human beings.

Chapter III

THE ROSE CLOUD

How long this lasted I do not know. Finally he spoke up.

"I don't understand anything."

"Me too."

"A man cannot split into two men."

"That's exactly what I figured."

He gave some thought to that.

"Maybe there is a snow maiden after all?"

"You're repeating," I said. "I have already thought about that. And that science is nonsense and self-consolation."

He smiled slightly embarrassed, as if rebuked by his senior. Actually, I was his senior. But then he corrected himself immediately:

"That's a joke. This is some kind of physical and psychic mystification. What kind exactly, I cannot make out yet. But there is an illusion..

There is something not real. You know what? Let's go see Zernov."

He understood me almost without speaking—he was my reflection. And our thoughts ran to the same thing: did our microscope survive the shock? It had, it turned out, and was in its place in the cabinet. The slides were also intact. My duplicate (or counterpart) took them out of the box. We compared our hands: even the corns and handnails were the same.

"We'll check and see," I said.

Each one of us pricked his finger and smeared the blood on the slides; then took turns looking through the microscope. The blood was identical in both cases.

"The same material," he said with a smirk, "a copy."

"You're the copy."

"No, you are."

"Wait a minute," I stopped him, "Who invited you to go on this expedition?"

"Why, Zernov, of course."

"And what was the purpose?"

"You're just asking so that you can later repeat the same thing."

"No, not at all. I can tell you. Because of the rose-coloured clouds, isn't that so?"

He squinted, recalling something, and then asked cunningly:

"What school did you finish?"

"Institute, not school."

"No, I'm asking about school. The number. What number was it, have you forgotten?"

"You're the one who has forgotten. I finished School No. 709."

"Well, okey. But who sat next to you on the left?"

"Now, listen. Why are you examining me?"

"Just a check up, that's all. You might have forgotten Lena, you see. Incidentally, she got married shortly afterwards."

"Yes, she married Fibikh," I said.

He sighed.

"Your life coincides with mine."

"Still, I'm convinced that you are the copy, a spectre and a bit of witchcraft." I wound up getting angrier all the time. "Who was first to wake up? I was. And who first saw two tractors? Me again."

"Why two?" he asked suddenly.

That's when I began to laugh triumphantly. My priority was now complete and confirmed.

"For the simple reason that there is another one alongside it. The real one. Take a look."

He pressed against the side window and, perplexed, looked at me. Then without a word he put on a copy of my jacket and went out onto the ice. The identically welded piece of tread and the identically bent glass of the window made him frown. Cautiously, he looked into the entrance way, went on into the navigator's room and then returned to the table with my camera. He even examined it.

"A real sister," he said gloomily.

"As you see, she and I were born a bit earlier."

"All you did was wake up earlier," he added frowning, "and no one knows which one of us is the real one. Actually, I do know."

"Suppose he's right, after all?" I thought to myself. "Just suppose the duplicate and phantom

are not he at all, but me? After all, who can determine a thing like that if our fingernails have the same markings and our schoolmates are the same? Even our thoughts are duplicated, even feelings if the stimuli from without are the same."

We looked at each other as if into a mirror. Just imagine a thing like that happening!

"You know what I'm thinking about right now?" he said suddenly.

"Yes, I do," I answered. "Let's see."

I knew what he was thinking, because I was thinking about the very same thing. If there are two tractors on the ice and it is not known which of them fell into the crack in the ice, then why are the same windows in both broken? And if both of them fell through, how did they get out?

We stopped our conversation and both ran to the opening in the ice crust. We stretched out on the ice and crawled right up to the edge of the precipice, and then all was clear. Only one of the machines had fallen in because there was only one set of tracks. It had got caught about three metres from the edge of the precipice, between the two walls that came close together at this point. We could also see little steps made in the ice probably by Vano or Zernov, depending on who succeeded first in getting to the surface. This obviously meant that the second "Kharkovchanka" machine appeared already after the fall of the first. But then who pulled the first one out? It couldn't get out of the crevice by itself definitely.

I took another glance into the precipice. It was black, deep, menacing and bottomless. I picked up a piece of ice that had broken off the edge—

probably a chunk knocked out by the hack used to cut the steps—and tossed it down. It straightway vanished from view but I did not hear any sound of its hitting something. Then an idea flashed through my mind: maybe give this fellow-duplicate of mine a push? Run up to him and trip him into the precipice?...

"Don't think you'll be able to do it," he said.

I was dumbfounded at first and only later caught on.

"You were thinking of the same thing?"

"Of course."

"Let's fight, then. Perhaps one of us will kill the other."

"And suppose both are killed?"

We stood opposite one another, angry, all keyed up, throwing absolutely identical shadows on the snow. Then suddenly all this struck us both as being funny.

"This is a farce," I said. "We'll get back to Moscow and they'll show us around in a circus. Two-Anoknin-Two."

"Why a circus? In the Academy of Sciences. A new phenomenon, something like the rose clouds."

"Which don't exist."

"Take a look." He pointed to the sky.

In the hazy blue in the distance billowed a rose-coloured cloud. All alone, no companions, no satellites, just like a spot of wine on a white tablecloth. It floated very slowly and low, much below storm clouds, and did not at all look like a cloud. I would sooner have compared it to a dirigible. It even resembled more a piece of dark

rose-coloured dough rolled out on the table or a large kite floating lazily in the sky. Jerking along, pulsating, it moved sideways to the earth as if alive.

"A jellyfish," my counterpart said, repeating my own thoughts on the subject, "a live rose jellyfish. Without tentacles."

"Quit repeating my nonsense. That's a substance and not a creature."

"You think so?"

"Just the way you do. Take a better look."

"But why does it jerk so?"

"It's billowing because it's a gas or water vapour. Perhaps dust, on the other hand," I added not very sure of myself.

The crimson kite came to halt right overhead and began to descend. It was some five hundred metres distance from us, hardly more. The shimmering edges of it turned downwards and grew dark. The kite was turning into a bell.

"Oh, what a nut!" I exclaimed remembering my camera. "This is just what ought to be photographed!"

I rushed to my "Kharkovchanka" vehicle, checked to see that the camera was in working order and the colour-film spool in place. All that took but a minute. I began to shoot right through the open door, and jumping down onto the ice I ran around the two machines and found another angle for some more shots. Only then did I notice that my alter ego stood without camera and was watching my movements in a detached, lost sort of fashion.

"Why aren't you taking pictures?" I yelled without taking my eye off the viewfinder.

He did not answer at once and when he did it was strangely slow.

"I dooon't know. Something is-is-is bothering me."

"What's all this about?"

"...don't know."

I looked intently at him and even forgot about the threat from the sky. This finally was a real difference! We weren't, after all, so completely the same. He was experiencing something I did not feel. Something was hampering his movements, yet I was free. Without thinking twice I snapped him and the duplicate tractor as well. For an instant I even forgot about the rose cloud but he reminded me.

"It's diving."

The crimson bell was no longer slowly descending, it was falling, plunging downwards. I instinctively jumped to the side.

"Run," I cried.

My new twin finally moved a bit, but he did not run. Very strangely, he walked backwards to his own vehicle.

"Where are you going? Are you crazy?"

The bell enveloped him and he did not even answer. I again looked into the viewfinder and hurried to take these important shots. Fear had even left me because what I was photographing now was something truly nonterrestrial. No cameraman had ever taken pictures like these before.

The cloud grew smaller in size and darker still. Now it was like an upturned saucer for an enormous tropical plant. It was no more than six to seven metres from the ground.

“Look out!” I cried.

I had suddenly forgotten that he too was a phenomenon and not a living being, and in one gigantic unimaginable effort I jumped to his aid. I couldn't have helped him anyway, it turned out, but the jump cut the distance between us by one half. In one more jump I might have caught him. But something intervened and would not let me; it even sent me reeling backwards, as if by a shock wave or a gust of hurricane wind. I nearly fell, but still held on to my camera. The giant flower had already reached the earth and its purple-red petals, pulsating in a wild fashion, covered over both duplicates, the vehicle and me. Another second and they touched the snow-covered ice. Now, alongside my tractor towered a mysterious crimson hill. It appeared to steam and boil and bubble, and was all shrouded in the rippling colours of a crimson-like haze. Golden sparks scintillated as if flashes of electric discharges. I continued to take pictures, all the while attempting to get as close as possible. Another step, yet another, . . . and my feet grew heavy, still heavier as if tied to the icefield. An invisible magnet in them drew me down, as it were—not a step more. And I stopped.

The hillock became just the slightest bit brighter, the dull dark red brightened to a crimson and then it all shot straight upwards. The upturned saucer expanded, its rosy edges slowly turned upwards. The bell was again transformed into a kite, a rose-coloured cloud, a blob of gas billowing in the wind. It did not pick anything up from the earth, no condensations or nebulous formations were at all noticeable in its interior.

But down below stood my "Kharkovchanka" on the icefield, all alone. Its mysterious double had vanished instantaneously, just as it had appeared. Only the snow revealed traces of the wide treads, but the wind blew and they were soon covered over with an even coat of fluffy snow. The "cloud" too disappeared somewhere beyond the edge of the wall of ice. I looked at my watch. Thirty-three minutes had passed since, on coming to my senses, I had checked the time.

I experienced an unusual feeling of relief from the knowledge that something terrible indeed, something totally unexplainable had gone out of my life. More terrible actually because I had already begun to get used to the inexplicability, as a mad man gets used to his madness. The delirium evaporated together with the rose gas, the invisible barrier also vanished that did not allow me to approach my duplicate. Now I was able to go up to my machine and I sat down on the iron step. I did not stop to think that I would freeze to the metal as the temperature continued to drop. Now nothing concerned me except the thought of accounting in some way for that half hour of nightmare. For the second time, the third time and the tenth time I dropped my head to my hands and asked aloud:

"What actually did take place after the accident?"

Chapter IV
BEING OR SUBSTANCE?

The answer was:

"The most important thing is that you are alive, Anokhin. Really, I feared for the worst."

I raised my head—in front of me stood Zernov and Tolya. Zernov did the questioning, while Tolya stamped his skis and knocked the snow about with his sticks. Stout and shaggy with a soft down of hair on his face instead of our unshaven bristles, he seemed to have lost his sceptical mockery and looked with boyish eyes all excited and happy.

"Where did you people come from?" I asked.

I was so tired and worn out that I didn't even have strength enough to smile.

"Oh, right nearby," Tolya chirped, "a couple of kilometres at the most. We've got a tent there, too."

"Wait a minute, Dyachuk," Zernov put in, "there's time for that. How do you feel, Anokhin? How did you get out? How long ago?"

"So many questions," I said. My tongue was as unruly as that of a drunkard. "Let's start in some order, from the end, say. How long ago did I get out? I don't know. How? Don't know again. How do I feel? More or less normal, as far as I can make out. No fractures, no bumps."

"Your morale?"

Finally I smiled, but it came out rather grim and insincere because Zernov immediately asked again:

"Do you really think that we simply left you in the lurch?"

"No, not for a minute," I said, "but a series of bizarre events took place that I can't account for."

"That I see," Zernov said looking over our ill-fated vehicle. "A tough machine it turned out to be. Just bent in a few spots. Who was it that pulled you out?"

I shrugged.

"There are no volcanoes here. No pressure from below to eject you. So somebody must have done the job."

"I don't know what happened," I said. "I just found myself on the plateau here."

"Boris Arkadievich!" Tolya cried. "There's only one machine. The other one must have simply left. That's what I said, a Sno-Cat or a tractor. They did it with steel cables, that's all."

"Pulled it out and left," said Zernov doubtfully. "And left Anokhin behind, without giving him any aid. Very strange, very strange indeed."

"Perhaps they figured he was out for good. That he was dead. But maybe they'll be back. They might have a site nearby. And a doctor too."

I was fed up with those nonsensical imaginings of Tolya. He was hopeless whenever wound up.

"Shut up for a while, will you!" I put in, making a wry face. "In this case, ten tractors wouldn't have been able to do anything. And there weren't any cables either. And the second vehicle did not go away, it vanished."

"So there was a second one after all?" Zernov asked.

"Yes, there was."

"But what does 'vanished' mean? Did it perish?"

"To a certain extent. That's a long story, actually. There was a duplicate of our 'Kharkov-chanka' machine. Not just a copy, but a duplicate, a phantom, a spectre. But a real spectre, an actual one."

Zernov listened attentively and with interest without saying anything. There was nothing in his eyes that said: crazy, out of your head, you need psychiatric treatment.

But Dyachuk was constantly ready with a term or two, and aloud he said:

"You're something like Vano. Miracles are all you two can see. He came running crazy-like and yelling. 'There are two machines and two Anokhins!' And his teeth were chattering."

"You would have crawled on all fours if you had seen the wonders that I did," I put in cutting him short, "there was no imagination in this case because there were two vehicles and two Anokhins."

Tolya moved his lips but said nothing and looked at Zernov; Zernov turned aside for some reason. And in place of an answer he asked, jerking his head in the direction of the door behind me:

"Is everything intact there?"

"I think so, though I didn't check to find out," I replied.

"Then let's have some breakfast. No objections? We haven't had anything to eat since then."

I understood Zernov's psychological maneuver: he wanted to calm me down and create a

proper atmosphere for conversation, for I was obviously upset. At table, where we greedily devoured Tolya's lousy omelette, the head of the expedition related what had taken place immediately following the accident on the plateau.

When the tractor had plunged into the crevice, breaking through a treacherous crust of frozen snow and had got caught a relatively short distance from the top and pressed between jags in the icy ravine, only the outside glass of the window was slightly damaged despite the force of the impact. The light did not even go out in the cabin. Only Dyachuk and I lost consciousness. Zernov and Chokheli held on with only a couple of scratches. They tried to bring Tolya and me around first. Dyachuk came to immediately. But his head was going round in circles and his feet felt like cotton. "A concussion of a sort," he said. "That'll pass. Let's see what's wrong with Anokhin." He was already getting into the role of doctor. They pulled him over to me and the three of them tried to bring me to. But neither ammonia salts nor artificial respiration helped. "He seems to be in shock, if you ask me," said Tolya. Vano, meanwhile, had made his way through the upper hatch and from the roof of the "Kharkovchanka" reported that it was possible to get out of the crevice. But Tolya was against trying to get me out. "The main thing now," he said, "is to protect him from the cold. I believe that shock passes into sleep and sleep will set up a protective inhibition." At this point Tolya almost went out again, and it was decided to start the evacuation with Tolya and leave me in the cabin for the time being. They took skis,

sleighs, the tent, a portable stove and briquettes for heating, a lantern and part of the food supply. Though the machine was in a stable position and there was no more danger of it falling farther, they did not want to stay any longer hanging over the precipice. Zernov recalled the cave in the ice wall a short distance from the site of the accident. So they decided to transfer all the equipment there and Tolya too and then set up the tent and stove and return for me. In half an hour they had reached the cave. Zernov and Tolya, who had meanwhile regained some strength, remained to set up the tent, while Vano returned with empty sleigh to fetch me. It was then that the event took place which made them think that he had momentarily lost his mind. Hardly an hour had passed when he came running back with mad eyes, in a state of strange feverish excitement. The machine he said was not in the crevice but on an icefield, and what is more, there was another one just like it alongside, with the same dent in the front glass. And in each one of the two cabins he found me lying on the floor unconscious. At this point he cried out in terror, figuring that he must have gone mad, and ran back. there he drank down a whole glass of spirits and refused point blank to go after me, saying that he was used to dealing with human beings and not snow maidens. Then Zernov and Tolya set out for me.

In response, I told them my version of the story, which was still more remarkable than Vano's ravings. They listened avidly, credulously, the way children listen to a fairy story, not a single sceptical snicker, only Dyachuk hurried

me on now and then with "and then what". Their eyes shone so that I felt they both ought to repeat Vano's experiment with the glass of vodka. But when I finished they both were silent for a long time, hoping, I imagine, for an explanation from me.

But I was silent too.

"Don't be angry, Yuri," Dyachuk finally mumbled. "Scott's diary, or something like that. Well, what I mean is self-hypnosis. Snow hallucinations. White dreams."

"And how about Vano?" Zernov asked.

"Well, of course, as a doctor I—"

"You're a hell of a doctor," put in Zernov, "so let's forget it. There are too many unknowns to try and solve the equation straight off. Let's begin from the beginning. Who pulled out the machine? From a three-metre-deep well, and wedged into a vice that no factory could have made. Yes, and weighing thirty-five tons. Even a whole tractor train would probably not be strong enough. And what did they use to pull it out? Cables? Nonsense. Steel cables would definitely leave traces on the body of the machine. But there aren't any, as you can see."

He got up without saying a word and went into the navigator's room.

"But that's sheer nonsense, madness, Boris Arkadievich!" Tolya yelled after him.

Zernov turned round.

"What do you mean?"

"Why all these adventures of Anokhin, the new Münchhausen, all these duplicates, clouds, vampire flowers and mysterious vanishing."

"Anokhin, didn't you have a camera in your

hand when we came up?" Zernov asked. "You must have been taking some pictures."

"Yes, I photographed everything I could, the clouds, the double machine and my counterpart. I shot for about ten minutes."

Tolya blinked his eyes, but was still ready to argue, not at all about to give in.

"It's still a question what we'll see when he develops it."

"You'll see in just a minute," came Zernov's voice from his quarters. "Look out the window."

Coming towards us at half a kilometre altitude was a tightly wound up crimson pancake. The sky was already covered over with white fleecy wisps of cloud, and on their background it appeared to be less of a cloud. As before, it resembled a coloured sail or an enormous kite. Dyachuk cried out and ran to the doorway, we followed. The "cloud" passed over us without changing course, heading for the north to the turning of the ice wall. "Towards our tent," Tolya murmured and stepped towards me.

"I'm sorry, Yuri," he said and extended his hand, "I'm the poor fool this time."

I was in no mood to celebrate my victory.

"That's not even a cloud," he continued thoughtfully, summarizing certain ideas that had been worrying him. "What I mean is the ordinary kind of condensation of water vapour. These are not droplets and they're not crystal either. At first glance, at any rate. And why does it hug so close to the ground, and that strange colour? A gas, it can hardly be a gas. It's not dust either. If we had an aircraft I'd take a sample."

"They'd be eager to let you have some," I

remarked recalling the invisible barrier and my attempts to get through it with my camera. "It presses down to the ground mighty hard, I thought the soles of my shoes were magnetic."

"Do you think it's something living?"

"Might be."

"A creature of some kind?"

"That's hard to say, it might even be a substance." I recalled my conversation with my double and added: "Probably controllable."

"How?"

"You ought to know, you're a meteorologist,"

"But are you sure it has some connection with meteorology?"

I said nothing. And when we returned to the cabin, Tolya suddenly expressed a really crazy idea.

"Suppose those are some kind of inhabitants of the ice continent unknown to science?"

"Brilliant," I said. "In the spirit of Conan Doyle. Courageous explorers discover lost world on Antarctic plateau. And you're Lord Roxton?"

"There's nothing funny in that. What's your hypothesis if you've got one?"

Stung, I said the first thing that came to mind.

"Cybernetic robots most likely."

"Where from?"

"Oh, from Europe or from the United States. Just tests that's all."

"But for what purpose?"

"Oh, say, for excavation purposes and the hoisting of big loads. The 'Kharkovchanka' machine was an ideal item for experimentation. That's why they hauled it up."

"But what sense is there in duplicating it?"

"It might be that these are some kind of ingenious devices for reproduction of atomic structures, whether protein or crystalline."

"Yes, but the purpose. What's the idea? I don't get it."

"According to the findings of Bodwin, an underdeveloped cerebellum reduces one's ability to comprehend by 14 to 23 per cent. Give that some thought and I'll be waiting. There's another element of the hypothesis and a significant one."

Tolya was so eager to figure this out that he swallowed Bodwin and the percentage without a word.

"I give up," he said. "What element?"

"The counterparts or doubles," I pointed out. "You were on the right track when you spoke of self-hypnosis. But only on the track. The truth lies in a different direction and on another route. It's not self-hypnosis, but intervention in the processing of information. Actually, there were no duplicates at all, no second vehicle, no second Anokhim, no duplicate clothing and things, like say my jacket or camera. The 'cloud' reorganized my psychic state and created a dichotomous perception of the world. And as a result, a splitting of the personality, a twilight state of the soul."

"Still and all, your hypothesis lacks the most important thing: it does not account for the physico-chemical nature of these devices, nor does it explain the technical workings or the purpose in making them and using them."

To call my ravings a hypothesis was of course sheer nonsense, to say the least. I concocted it on the spur of the moment and persisted in developing it only out of stubbornness. It was perfectly

clear to me myself that it accounted for nothing, and, what is most important, it did not answer the question of why it was necessary to eliminate the doubles that had existed only in my imagination or why I was not allowed to approach the mysterious laboratory. Of course everything depended on the developed film. If the cine eye caught what I saw, then my hypothesis was hardly more than a joke.

"Boris Arkadievich, we need help," Tolya implored.

"In what?" Zernov said. He obviously hadn't been listening. "Anokhin has a fine imagination, it's a wonderful quality for painters and scientists."

"He's got a hypothesis."

"Every hypothesis requires verification."

"But every hypothesis has a limiting probability."

"The limit of Anokhin's," Zernov agreed, "is in the state of the ice of this region. It cannot explain why and for whom all these tens and perhaps hundreds of cubic kilometres of ice are."

We didn't grasp the meaning and so Zernov patiently and condescendingly explained.

"Before the accident I called your attention to the flawless profile of the wall of ice that starts god knows where and stretches for I don't know how long. To me it seemed to be an artificial cut. And under foot the cut was just as artificial. Even at that time I noticed how insignificant the density and thickness of the snow cover was. I can't help but feel that a few kilometers from here we might find a similar wall parallel to this one. It's sheer conjecture of course. But if it's right, then what kind of force could have extracted and

transported such a layer of ice? A cloud? Perhaps. After all, we do not know its capabilities. But of European or American origin?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Then you tell me, Anokhin, what were these millions of tons of ice for and where have they disappeared to?"

"But was this an excavation, Boris Arkadievich? You say there are two borders to an extracted layer. Why?" I exclaimed, "Where are the transverse cuts? Besides it is more natural to perform the excavation in the form of a crater."

"That is, if you are not concerned about movements over the continent. Apparently, they did not want to interfere in such movements. Why? The time has not yet come for conclusions, but I think that they are not hostile; on the contrary, they appear to be friendly. Then look at it this way: for whom is it more natural to excavate ice precisely in that fashion and not otherwise? For us? We would have put up a fence around the site, nailed up directions and instructions, announced the business over the radio. But suppose they couldn't or didn't want to?"

"Who are these 'they'?"

"I am not making any hypotheses," Zernov answered drily.

Chapter V

SLEEP WITHOUT DREAMS

I took along my cine camera on our journey to the tent but no "cloud" put in an appearance. At our little council we decided to move to the

cabin of the tractor, make the necessary repairs and then move on. We received permission to continue the search for the rose clouds. Just before our discussion, I connected Zernov with Mirny. He reported the accident briefly, mentioned the "clouds" we had seen and also the first movies I had taken of them. He did not say anything about duplicates and the other mysteries. "Too early," he said to me.

They selected a nice site at a distance of a quarter of an hour on skis with a wind at our back. The tent was up in the cave, which was protected from the wind from three sides. However, the cave itself produced a strange impression: a cube of ice had been carefully cut out and had left perfectly smooth walls, as if they had been planed by hand. No icicles, no accretions of ice. Zernov, without saying a word, punched the tip of his ski stick into a geometrically regular cut of ice, as if to say that nature had nothing to do with that.

We didn't find Vano in the tent, but everything was in disorder—an upturned stove and the box with briquettes, skis thrown about, and the leather coat of the driver at the entrance way. This was surprising and suggested danger. Without taking off our skis we went in search of Chokheli and found him right near the ice wall. He was lying in the snow with only a sweater on. His unshaven face and black cap of hair were covered with a thin fluffy layer of snow. In one hand, thrown to the side, he clenched a knife with traces of caked frozen blood. On the snow near his shoulder was a spread-out rose-coloured spot. The snow about had been stamped on, and

as far as we could make out, the tracks were those of Vano, for he wore enormous-size boots.

He was alive. When we raised him, he moaned but did not open his eyes. Being the strongest, I lifted him onto my back. Tolya supported him from behind. In the tent we carefully removed the sweater and found the wound to be quite superficial. There was little loss of blood and the blood on the knife was most likely that of his opponent. We were not so much afraid of the loss of blood as of overcooling. We did not know how long he had lain on the ice. But luckily it wasn't very cold and he was tough. We rubbed the boy with alcohol and, pulling open his clenched teeth, we poured some inside. Vano coughed, opened his eyes and muttered something in his native Georgian.

"Don't move," we cried, bundling him up in the sleeping bag like a mummy.

"Where is he?" Vano asked suddenly, coming to. This time he spoke Russian.

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

He did not respond, his strength was giving out and he began to rave. It was impossible to make anything out of the gibberish of mixed Russian and Georgian words.

"The snow maiden," was what I heard, at least that is what I thought I heard.

"He's delirious," Dyachuk said grieved.

Only Zernov was calm.

"That guy's cast iron," it was said of Vano, but it could have been said of Zernov himself.

We decided to wait till evening before starting on our journey, all the more so since both day and evening were just as light. And Vano needed

some sleep too: the alcohol was beginning to take action. A strange torpidude took hold of us as well. Tolya grunted, climbed into his sleeping bag and was soon asleep. Zernov and I tried our best to stay awake, smoke a cigarette, but finally gave up. We spread out our sponge mat and slithered into our sleeping bags.

"We'll take an hour off and then start on the trip."

"Okay, boss, one hour of sleep."

There was silence.

For some reason, neither he nor I expressed any ideas about what had happened to Vano. As if in conspiracy we refrained from any commentary, though I am sure we were both thinking about the same thing. Who was Vano's enemy and where did he come from in this polar desert? Why was Vano undressed and outside the cave, he had not even had time to put on his leather coat. This means the fight began in the tent. What came before that? And why the blood-covered knife in Vano's hand? This was surprising especially since Chokheli never used weapons, despite his excitable nature, unless truly forced to it. What made him do it—did he try to defend someone or was it simply a marauding attack? But that is certainly funny, robbers beyond the Antarctic circle where friendship is the law of every encounter. But perhaps he was a criminal escaping justice. Again obvious nonsense. No government would exile anyone to the Antarctic and to try to escape to this icy continent by one's self would be practically impossible. But it might be that Vano's opponent was a shipwrecked sailor who had gone mad from

unbearable aloneness. But we had not heard of any shipwrecks near the Antarctic coasts. And of course how could he have found his way so far into the interior of the icy continent? Zernov was most probably asking himself those very same questions. But he kept silent and so did I.

It was not cold in the tent, for the stove was still giving off some warmth, and it was not dark. The light coming through the mica windows did not really illuminate the objects within, but it was enough to distinguish them in the dim twilight. However, gradually or at once—I did not notice how or when—the twilight did not exactly get denser or darker but somehow turned violetish, as if someone had dissolved a few grains of manganate. I wanted to get up, and push Zernov and call him, but I couldn't—something was pressing on my throat, something pressed me to the ground, just as had happened in the "Kharkovchanka" when I regained consciousness. But at that time it seemed to me that somebody was looking through me, filling me full and merging with every cell of my body. Now, if to use the same picturesque code, somebody had looked into my brain and then let go, enveloping me in a violet cocoon. I could look but I didn't see anything. I could think about what was occurring but I could not understand it at all. I could breathe and move but only within my cocoon. The slightest penetration into the violet gloom called forth a response like that of an electric shock.

I do not know how long that continued, for I didn't look at my watch. But the cocoon suddenly opened up and I saw the walls of the tent and

my comrades asleep in the same dim, but no longer violet, twilight. Something hit me and I climbed out of the sleeping bag, picked up my camera and rushed out. Snow was coming down, the sky was covered over with turbulent cumulus clouds. Only somewhere in the zenith did the familiar rose-coloured spot fleet by. It flashed across and vanished. But perhaps that was all a dream.

When I returned, Tolya, yawning broadly, was seated on the sleigh and Zernov was slowly climbing out of his sleeping bag. He glanced at me, at my cine camera and, as is usual with him, said nothing. Dyachuk said through his yawn:

"What an awful dream I had, comrades! As if I was asleep, and not asleep. I wanted to sleep, yet I couldn't fall asleep for anything. I was just lying there in forgetfulness and couldn't see anything, no tent, nobody. Then something sticky, dense and thick like jelly plumped onto me. It wasn't warm, it wasn't cold, I just couldn't feel. It filled me up right to the ears, complete, as if I were dissolved, like in a state of weightlessness, you float or hang in space. And I didn't see myself or feel anything. I was there and yet I wasn't at all. Boy, that's funny, isn't it?"

"Curious it certainly is," said Zernov and turned away.

"Didn't you see anything?" I asked.

"And you?"

"Not now, but in the cabin, just before I woke up I felt exactly the way Dyachuk did. Weightlessness, no sensations, no dream, no reality."

"Mysteries, all of them," Zernov muttered. "Whom have you found, Anokhin?"

I turned round. Throwing back the canvas door of the tent, obviously right behind me, came a robust man in a cap with high standing artificial fur and in a nylon fur jacket with a zipper. He was tall, broad in the shoulders and unshaven and appeared to be terribly frightened. What could have frightened this athlete is hard to imagine.

"Anyone speak English here?" he asked, chewing and stretching the words as he spoke.

"Not one of my teachers ever had a pronunciation like that. A southerner, probably from Alabama or Tennessee," I thought.

Zernov spoke the best English among us and so he answered:

"Who are you and what do you want?"

"Donald Martin!" he yelled. "Flier from MacMurdo. Got anything to drink? As strong as you've got." He drew the edge of his palm across his throat. "Very necessary."

"Give him some spirits, Anokhin," said Zernov.

I poured out a glass and gave it to him. Though very unshaven, he couldn't have been older than me. He took the whole almost at a single swallow, coughed, his throat constricted and his eyes filled with blood.

"Thank you, sir," he said finally when he could catch his breath. Then he started to tremble. "I had to make a forced landing, sir."

"Skip the 'sir'," said Zernov, "I'm not your superior. My name is Zernov. Zer-nov," he repeated each syllable. "Where did you land?"

"Not far from here. Almost alongside."

"Without mishap?"

"No fuel, and the radio's on the bum."

"Then you can stay here. And you can help us move over to the tractor." Zernov stopped, trying to get the proper English pronunciation, and, seeing that the American wasn't sure, he added: "Oh, there's place enough and we have a radio set."

The American continued to hesitate, as if not decided yet that he would speak, then he pulled himself up and in military fashion said:

"Please arrest me, sir. I have committed a crime."

Zernov and I exchanged glances. Perhaps the thought of Vano occurred to us at the same time.

"What kind of a crime?" Zernov asked guardedly.

"I think that I have killed a man."

Chapter VI

THE SECOND FLOWER

Zernov walked over to Vano who was all covered up. He threw back the fur from his face and sharply asked the American:

"Is this the man?"

Martin cautiously and, what appeared to me to be in a frightened manner, approached and said rather unconvincingly:

"Nnnoo."

"Take a better look," said Zernov still more sharply.

The flier shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"Not at all like him, sir. Mine is in the plane, and what is more," he added with care, "I still don't know whether he's a human being or not."

At that moment Vano opened his eyes. He glanced at the American who stood near him, his head rose above the pillow and then he fell back again.

"That's ... not me," he said and closed his eyes.

"He's still delirious," Tolya signed.

"Our comrade is wounded. Somebody attacked him. We do not know who it was," Zernov explained to the American. "And so when you said ..." he delicately dropped the subject.

Martin pulled over Tolya's sleigh and sat down, covering his face with his hands and teetered back and forth as if in unbearable pain.

"I don't know whether you'll believe me or not, it's all so unusual and unlike the truth," he started to relate. "I was flying a one-seater, a little Lockheed, a former fighter plane, you know the kind. It even has a double machine-gun for circular fire. One doesn't need it here, naturally, but the rules state that you have to keep the gun in order, just in case. And there was a case only it didn't work out. Have you people ever heard of rose clouds?" he asked suddenly, and without waiting for an answer he continued, a cramp deforming his mouth for a moment. "I caught up with them about an hour and a half after take-off."

"Them?" I asked incredulously. "There were several?"

"A whole squadron. They were flying low, about two miles below me, large rose jellyfish.

Maybe a dark red, crimson, say. I counted seven of different shapes and hues from the pale rose of not-yet-ripe raspberry to a flaming garnet. Now the colour was changing all the time, getting darker or thinning out as if diluted with water. I cut speed and plunged, calculating on getting a sample. I have a special container under the undercarriage. But it didn't work, the medusas escaped. I caught up with them but they escaped again, without any effort, as if they were playing hide and seek. And when I increased my speed they rose and scudded away above me. Light large and flat, like a kid's balloon. But are they fast, why they'd outstrip a four-engine Boeing. They led me on as if they were living beings. Only a living being can act that way when it feels danger. And so I thought, if that's the case, they themselves may become dangerous. I figured I ought to get away. But they appeared to guess my maneuver. Three crimson jellyfish rushed out at a terrific speed and swinging round without cutting speed they plunged for me. I didn't even have time to yell, the plane was enveloped in a fog, not even a fog, something slime like, thick and slippery. That's when I lost control completely—speed, control and visibility. I couldn't even move my foot or hand. I figured that's the end. The plane wasn't falling, it was sliding downwards like a glider. Then it landed and I didn't even notice how it landed. The sensation was like sinking into a reddish slime, choked but not dead. I looked around; snow everywhere and a plane next to mine, a copy of my little Lockheed. I got out and went up to it, and coming out of the cabin

was another great big guy like me. I don't know, he looked familiar. Couldn't figure it out. So I asked him: "Who are you?" "Donald Martin," he says. Looking at him was like looking in a mirror. "And you?" "No, I said, I'm Donald Martin." He struck out at me, I ducked and sent a left to the jaw. He fell and hit his head against the door, an awful bang! There he was lying still. I gave him a kick, but he didn't move. Then I shook him. His head just dangled. I dragged him over to my plane and thought I'd get him to the base for help, but when I checked the gas, there wasn't a drop. So I went to radio the news but the set wouldn't work. I must have gone out of my head then, because I just jumped out and ran for all I was worth, no direction, no aim, I just ran, because I couldn't stand the crazy house any longer. I even forgot how to pray, all I could say was Jesus Christ. Then I saw your tent and here I am."

Listening to him I recalled my own trials and tribulations and now began to realize what had happened to Vano. What Tolya was thinking, with his eyes bulging out, was hard to say; he was probably doubting and double checking every word Martin uttered. He was about to start with questions in his school English, but Zernov got in ahead of him:

"You remain here with Vano, Dyachuk, and Anokhin and I'll go with the American. Let's go, Martin," he added in English.

Instinct or premonition—I don't know what psychologists would call it—told me to take my cine camera, and I was thankful for that subconscious idea. Even Tolya looked surprised—the

body for the inspector or the behaviour of the murderer at the sight of the body? The pictures I took were different, however, and I began to shoot as we approached the site of Martin's accident. There were no longer two planes, but one—Martin's own silver canary, his polar veteran with swept wings. But right next to it the familiar (to me) bubbling crimson hillock. It smoked, changed shades of colour and pulsated in a strange manner, as if it were indeed breathing. White elongated flashes broke out from time to time like sparks in welding.

"Don't go near," I warned Martin and Zernov as they ran past me.

But the upturned flower had already extended its invisible shield. Martin who was in the lead strangely slowed down, and Zernov simply went down on his knees. But both of them pushed forward overcoming the force that pulled them groundwards.

"Jesus!" yelled Martin turning to me, and he fell to the ground.

Zernov retreated, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

Meanwhile I was shooting all of this; I moved round the crimson hillock and bumped into the murdered man, or perhaps Martin's double who was only wounded. He was lying in the same nylon jacket with synthetic fur covered over with a fluff of snow some three to four metres from the airplane where Martin had dragged him.

"Come on over here, here he is!" I cried.

Zernov and Martin ran over towards me, rather they seemed to skate over to me, balanc-

ing with their hands, as one does when walking on ice without skates. Here too, the big flakes of snow had powdered the smooth thickness of ice.

Then something utterly new happened that neither I nor my camera had ever recorded. A crimson petal separated itself from the vibrating flower, darkened, curled up in the air and stretching out into a living four-metre-long snake with open jaws covered the body lying before us. For a moment or two this snake-like tentacle sparkled and boiled and then tore off the ground and in its enormous two-metre maw we saw nothing—only a violet emptiness of an unnaturally stretched-out bell that before our very eyes changed shape from cone to rippling petal. Then it merged with the cupola. The only thing left on the snow was a trace—a formless silhouette of the man that had just lain here.

I continued filming all this in a hurry to catch the latest transformations. It had begun. The whole flower had now detached itself from the ground, and as it rose the rim curved upwards. The bell, spread out in the air, was likewise empty: we could clearly see that there was nothing whatsoever inside, we saw the rose coloured interior and the delicate expanding edges. It would now turn into a rose “cloud” and vanish beyond the other real clouds. And on the ground there would be only one airplane and one pilot. That is exactly what took place.

Zernov and Martin stood silent, stunned, just like I was the first time that morning. I think Zernov had already come close to deciphering the puzzle which to me was still only a faint glimmer

of a possibility. It did not shine, it only suggested the outlines of a fantastic but still logically admissible picture. Martin was simply crushed not so much by the horror of what had occurred but by the single thought that this was only the fruit of a disturbed imagination. He obviously wanted to ask about something, his terrified look restlessly flitted from me to Zernov until, finally, Zernov smiled as if to say, go ahead. And Martin put the question.

"Who was it I killed?"

"We can take it that it wasn't anybody," Zernov smiled again.

"But that was a real live man," Martin repeated.

"Are you sure?" Zernov asked.

Martin was confused.

"I don't know."

"That's just it. I would say temporarily alive. The same force created it and wiped it out."

"But why?" I asked cautiously.

He answered with exasperation—not like him at all.

"You think I know more than you do? Let's develop the film and see."

"And you think we'll understand then?" I no longer tried to hide the irony.

"It might be," he said deep in thought.

Then he went out ahead without even inviting us to come along. We exchanged glances and followed together.

"What's your name?" Martin asked familiarly taking me by the arm. He must have seen we were of the same age.

"Yuri."

"Yuri, Yuri. Mine's Don. Do you think that thing was alive?"

"Yes, I have an inkling it was."

"Something local?"

"Don't think so. No expedition has ever encountered anything like it."

"Then where did it come from?"

"You'll have to ask somebody smarter than me, I don't know."

He was already getting under my skin. But he didn't seem offended.

"What do you think it is, jelly or gas?"

"You tried to take a sample, you should know."

He laughed.

"I wouldn't advise anyone to try. I wonder why it didn't just gobble me up there in the air? It swallowed me and then spit me out."

"I suppose it didn't find you very tasty."

"Did he swallow him up?"

"I don't know."

"But you saw what happened."

"I saw it cover him up, but I didn't see it swallow him. Rather it dissolved or evaporated the thing."

"What kind of temperature is needed?"

"Did you try to measure it?"

Martin even stopped, struck by the enigma.

"To melt a plane like that? In three minutes? Ultradurable duraluminum, by the way."

"Are you sure it was duraluminum and not a hole of a doughnut?"

He didn't understand and I didn't try to explain; from there on we didn't exchange a word till we got to the tent. Here too things were happening. I was struck by the strange pose Tolya

had taken, doubled up on the box of briquettes and clicking his teeth from horror or from the cold. The stove had already cooled off, but it didn't seem to be very cold in the tent.

"What's the trouble, Dyachuk?" Zernov asked. "Heat up the stove if you're cold."

Tolya did not answer; like one hypnotized, he sat down near the stove.

"Going nuts a little bit," said Vano from under his fur protection. He seemed to be gay enough.

"We had some visitors too," he added and nodded in the direction of Tolya.

"There wasn't anyone here. Speak for yourself!" he shrieked and turned to us. His face was twisted, distorted, almost about to cry.

Vano put his finger to his head as if to say we're all crazy. "We're a bit upset. Okay, tell your own story," he said to Tolya and turned away. "I myself was damn upset, Yuri, when I saw two copies of you. I couldn't stand it and ran like hell. Jesus it was awful, terrifying. I took a gulp of spirits and covered up with the coat. Wanted to go to sleep, but I couldn't. I don't know, I was asleep, maybe I wasn't, but I had an awful dream. A long one, mixed up, terrible and funny. It seems I was eating a jelly, dark, not red, but violet. An awful lot of it, so much in fact that it filled me right up to the ears. I don't remember how long that lasted. But as soon as I opened my eyes, I saw that everything was empty, cold, and you weren't here. Then suddenly he entered. My own self, like in a mirror, only without jacket and in socks."

Martin listened attentively. Though he did not understand the conversation in Russian, he guessed

that the talk was about something that definitely interested him as well. I took pity on him and translated the gist. He was at me all the while Vano related his story, asking for a faster translation. But I couldn't go that fast and only later did I relate the whole of Vano's story. Unlike us, Vano immediately detected a difference between himself and the guest. The drunken state had long since passed, and fear as well, only his head continued to throb; the man who entered looked at him with bull-like eyes, dull dazed eyes. "Quit this nonsense," he yelled in Georgian, "I'm not afraid of snow maidens, I make mince meat out of them!" The funniest thing was that Vano himself had thought about that in the same terms when Zernov and Tolya had left. If someone were about, he would definitely have got into a fight. That one started to, but Vano, sober now, grabbed his jacket and ran out of the tent, realizing at once that it was better to stay as far away as possible from such visitors. But Vano did not stop to think that his very appearance contradicted all the familiar laws of nature. What he needed was an open space to maneuver in the impending battle. His double had already whipped out the famous hunting knife Vano always carried with him to the envy of all drivers in Mirny. The original knife was in Vano's pocket, but he did not give any thought to that bit of strangeness either, he simply whipped it out when the drunken phantom struck the first blow. Vano barely escaped a wound—the knife went through the jacket. Vano threw it at his pursuer and got as far as the wall, where it turned to the north. The second blow reached him, but luckily it was

a glancing stroke that his sweater softened. The third one Vano was able to repulse by knocking the man down. What followed he did not remember. A bloody blackness fell over him and some kind of force, like a shock wave, threw him to the side. When he woke up he was in the tent on a cot bed wrapped up in furs and absolutely sound in body. But the miracles continued. This time it was Dyachuk who had a duplicate.

Vano did not succeed in finishing the sentence—Tolya threw the briquette (he was stoking the stove) and jumped up with a hysterical cry:

"Stop this craziness! Do you hear?"

"You're nuts," Vano said.

"Well, damn it, I'm not alone in this. You're crazy too. You're all mad. There wasn't anybody here except me. And nobody was split up either. You people are out of your minds!"

"That's enough, Dyachuk," Zernov cut him short. "Behave yourself. You are a scientist and not a circus performer. If you can't control your nerves, you shouldn't have come here in the first place."

"So I'll leave," Tolya growled, in a much lower tone this time: Zernov's words had sobered him up a bit. "I'm not Scott or Amundsen. I've had enough of these white dreams, and I'm not heading for any nut house either."

"What's the trouble with him?" Martin whispered.

I explained:

"If it weren't for the fuel, I'd quit too," he said. "Too many miracles happening around here."

Chapter VII

THE ICE SYMPHONY

We never found out what happened to Tolya, but it was most likely comical. Vano brushed the matter aside with:

"If he doesn't want to speak, leave him alone. Both of us were frightened out of our wits. I don't go in for gossip." He did not make fun of Tolya, though the latter was ready for a quarrel any time.

Martin and I, under Vano's supervision, replaced the dented plastic of the window. He couldn't do it himself because of the wound on his hand. It was also decided that Martin and I would take turns helping out with the driving. Now nothing else kept us there. Zernov considered the expedition at an end and was in a hurry to get back to Mirny. I had a feeling he wanted to get away from his double, he was the only one who hadn't experienced this unpleasant duplication. In direct violation of the cast iron regime of work and rest that he himself had set up, Zernov did not sleep all night after we had switched over to the cabin of the tractor. I woke up a few times in the night and saw his night-light on: he was obviously reading and trembled at every suspicious noise.

We didn't speak any more about doubles, but in the morning after breakfast, when we finally got under way, his face seemed to brighten up. Martin was driving, Vano sat next to him on the drop-down seat and gave instructions in sign language. I knocked out a radiogram to Mirny and exchanged jokes with Kolya Samoilov who was on duty at the radio station, and I took down

the weather report. It was just right for our return: clear, slight wind, a tiny frost of only two or three degrees below zero Celsius.

But the silence in the cabin hung heavy, like the aftermath of a quarrel, so I began:

"I have a question, Boris Arkadievich. Why don't we radio a few details."

"What would you like to add?"

"Why, everything that happened to me and Vano. What we found out about the rose clouds, and what we discovered when we developed the film."

"And how do you suppose a story like that should be written?" asked Zernov. "With psychological nuances, an analysis of sensations, with insinuations and so forth? Unfortunately, I'm no good at that, I'm not a writer. I don't think you could do it even with your imagination and your weird hypotheses. Now to put all that into telegraph code would be more like 'notes from an insane asylum'."

"We could add a scientific commentary," I persisted.

"On the basis of what kind of experimental data? What have we got except visual observations? Your film? But it hasn't even been developed."

"What could it be, really?"

"Well, what would you suggest? What, in your opinion is a rose 'cloud'?"

"An organism."

"Living?"

"Undoubtedly. A living thinking organism of a physico-chemical structure unknown to us. A kind of bio-suspension or bio-gas. Academician Kolmogorov postulated the possibility of the

~~existence of thinking~~ mould. One could imagine, with the same degree of probability, a thinking gas, a thinking colloid, or a thinking plasma. Change of colour is a protective reaction or the colouring of emotions: surprise, interest, anger. Changes in shape suggest motor reactions, the ability to maneuver in aerial space. When a person walks, he moves his hands, bends his feet and so on. The 'cloud' stretches out, bends its edges, folds up into a bell."

"What are you talking about?" asked Martin.

I translated for him.

"It bubbles when it breathes and throws out tentacles when it attacks," he added.

"That makes it a beast, doesn't it?" asked Zernov.

"A beast," Martin confirmed.

Zernov was not asking idle questions. Each one of them was directed at a specific target, one that was not clear to me. He seemed to be checking us and himself and was not hurrying with any conclusions.

"All right," he said, "then answer this: How does that beast duplicate human beings and machines? And why does he want to do it? Also, why does it destroy the models after running them in a bit with human beings?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "The 'cloud' synthesizes all kinds of atomic structures, that is clear. But the mystery is why it does so and why it destroys them."

Tolya, who had not been communicative for some time and for some unknown reason, put in a word at this point:

"I think the question is not posed in the prop-

er form. How does it duplicate? Why? It doesn't duplicate anything. It is simply an involved illusion dealing with sensory perceptions. It is not the subject matter of physics but of psychiatry."

"And my wound is also an illusion?" Vano asked offended.

"You hurt yourself, the rest is illusions. Actually, I don't see why Anokhin has given up his original hypothesis. Of course, this is a weapon. I wouldn't take it upon myself to say whose—he threw a glance at Martin—but it is undoubtedly a weapon. A sophisticated and, what is most important, a purposeful weapon. Psychiatric waves that split the consciousness."

"And ice," I said.

"Why ice?"

"Because the ice had to be broken up in order to get the 'Kharkovchanka' machine out."

"Look over there to the right!" Vano cried out.

What we saw through the port window stopped the argument instantaneously. Martin put the brakes on. We hurriedly got into our jackets and jumped out of the machine. I began taking pictures on the run because this promised to be one of the most remarkable of all my film strips.

This was a miracle indeed, a picture from another world of extraterrestrial life. There were no clouds, no snow. Nothing interfered. The sun hung just above the horizon giving all the strength of its light to the emerald-blue chunk of ice that towered above us. An ideally smooth cut through the multi-metre tower seemed to be pure glass. No human being, no machine could be seen anywhere. Only gigantic rose-coloured

disks—I counted ten or more—that delicately and soundlessly cut the ice like butter. Imagine cutting butter with a hot knife. This was it. No friction, a smooth, smooth cut with a slight fringe melting round the walls. That was exactly what was happening here, as the rose knife produced the hundred-metre walls of ice. It was in the shape of an irregular oval or trapezium with rounded angles; in area it must have been over a hundred square metres. At least that was my rough guess. But very thin, only about two or three centimetres. The familiar “cloud” had obviously flattened out, elongated and converted into an enormous cutting instrument operating with amazing speed and precision.

Separated by a distance of half a kilometre, two such knives were cutting the ice wall perpendicular to the base. Two others were cutting from below in regular coincident movements of a pendulum. Another set of four were engaged close by, and a third group, that I couldn't see any more, was operating deep inside the ice. Soon the second one and the one next to us disappeared in the ice—like a Gulliver Travels circus. All of a sudden, it pushed up into the air a perfectly blue parallelepiped of ice, a glass bar nearly a kilometre in length, geometrically flawless. It rose slowly and floated upwards lightly and without a thought, like a toy balloon. Only two “clouds” participated in this operation. They contracted and turned dark, converting into the familiar saucers, turned skywards not earthwards—two incredible red giant flowers on invisible expanding stems. They did not appear to be supporting the floating bar, for it rose above

them at a decent distance and was in no way connected or fastened.

"How does it hold up?" Martin asked in surprise. "On a shock wave? What force must the wind have?"

"That's not the wind," said Tolya picking out his English words carefully. "That's a field. Antigravitation." He threw an imploring glance at Zernov.

"A field of force," Zernov explained. "Remember the G-loading, Martin, when you and I tried to approach the airplane? Then it strengthened gravitation, now it is obviously neutralizing it."

At that moment yet another kilometre-long bar of ice rose from the surface of the ice plateau, thrown into space by an invisible titan. It rose much faster than its predecessor and soon caught up with them at the altitude of ordinary polar flights. One could clearly see how the ice bars approached in the air, docked alongside one another, and merged into one broad bar that hung motionless in the air. This was immediately followed by a third, that lay down on top, then a fourth, to balance the plate. It grew thicker with every fresh bar: the "clouds" required three to four minutes to cut it out of the thick continental ice and raise it into the sky. As new bars came off, the ice wall receded into the distance, and with it the rose clouds too, which appeared to dissolve and vanish in the snowy distance. As before, two red roses hung in the sky and above them the enormous crystal cube with bright sunlight filtering through.

We stood speechless, enchanted by this picture that was almost musical in its tones. A peculiar

kind of gracefulness and plasticity of the rose-coloured disc-knives, their coordinated rhythmical motions, the upward flight of the blue ice bars that formed a gigantic cube in the sky—all this was music to our ears, a soundless music of the mysterious spheres. We did not even notice—only my cine camera recorded it—how the diamond cube of sunlight began to diminish in size as it rose higher and higher, and finally vanished way up beyond the cirrus cloudlets. The two command “flowers” also vanished.

“A thousand million cubic metres of ice,” groaned Tolya.

I looked at Zernov. Our eyes met.

“That’s your answer to the main question, Anokhin,” he said. “Where did the ice wall come from and why there is so little snow under foot. They are removing the ice shield of the Antarctic.”

Chapter VIII

THE LAST DUPLICATE

The official report of our expedition was: Zernov’s statement on the phenomenon of the rose “clouds”, my story about doubles (or duplicates) and a preview of the film I had taken. But Zernov had different plans from the very beginning of the meeting. No materials for the scientific report except personal impressions and the film taken by the expedition, he explained; he added that the astronomical observations that he had familiarized himself with at Mirny do not yield any grounds for definite conclusions. The appear-

ance of enormous accumulations of ice in the atmosphere at a variety of altitudes was registered, it turns out, both by Soviet and foreign observatories in Antarctica. However, neither visual observations or special photographs permit establishing either the quantity of these quasi-celestial bodies or the direction of their flight. One can therefore speak only of impressions and conjectures that sometimes go by the name of hypotheses. But since the expedition returned three days ago and people are by habit garrulous and curious, everything seen by the members of the expedition is now known far beyond the limits of Mirny. It would naturally be best to engage in conjectures after viewing the film, since there will be more than enough material for such guesswork.

I do not know whom Zernov had in view when he mentioned talkativeness, but Vano and Tolya and I did much to excite the men and rumours of my film had even gotten across the continent. A Frenchman and two Australians and a whole group of Americans together with the retired Admiral Tompson, who has long since exchanged his admiral's galloons and shoulder straps for a fur jacket and polar sweater arrived to see the film. They had already heard about the film and eagerly awaited it, expressing all manner of suppositions. The film, even if I do say so, turned out to be exciting. Our second cinema operator, Zhenya Lazebnikov, looked at the developed film and howled out with envy: "That's the end. You're famous now. Not even Evans ever dreamt of a piece like this. You've got both hands on the Lomonosov Prize right now." Zernov did

not comment, but leaving the laboratory, he asked:

"Aren't you a little bit afraid, Anokhin?"

"Why should I be?" I countered in surprise.

"You can't image the sensation this is going to create."

I had felt something like that when we viewed the film at the base. Everybody was there who could make it, they sat and stood till there wasn't any more room to sit or stand. The silence was that of an empty church. Once in a while a rumble of amazement and almost terror, when even the old-timers of polar exploration used to quite a bit gave in. The skepticism and disbelief that some had received our stories with disappeared on the instant after pictures of two "Kharkovchanka" vehicles with identically dented front windows and the rose cloud floating above them in the pale blue sky. The frames were excellent and precisely conveyed the colour: the "cloud" on the screen went red, violet, changed shape, turned up in the form of a flower, boiled and gobbled up the huge machine with all its contents. The picture of my double did not cause excitement at first and was not convincing, for they simply took it for me myself, though I pointed out straightway that to film myself and in motion too and from different angles was simply impossible even for a Grand Master documentalist. But what really compelled them to believe in duplicate human beings were the pictures of Martin's double on the snow—I succeeded in getting him close up—and then the real Martin and Zernov approaching the site of the catastrophe. The hall buzzed with excitement

and when the crimson flower threw out a snake-like tentacle and the dead Martin vanished into its flared maw, somebody even cried out in the darkness. But the most striking effect, the deepest impression was made by the concluding part of the film, its ice symphony. Zernov was right, I greatly underestimated the sensation.

But the viewers gave it its due. The showing was hardly over when voices were heard demanding a second showing. This time the silence was total: not a single exclamation resounded in the hall, nobody coughed, no one exchanged a single word with his neighbour, even whispering could not be heard. The silence continued even when the lights went on. The people were still in the grip of events and were released only by the voice of the oldest of the old-timers, the doyen of the corps of wintering-over men, Professor ~~Kedrin~~, who said:

"All right, now tell us, Boris, what you think about it. That will be better because we still have to think things over."

"I've already said that we have no material witnesses," Zernov replied. "Martin was not able to get a sample: the 'cloud' did not allow him to approach. On the ground, too, we could not get close enough and were pressed to the ground as if our bodies were filled with lead. This means that the 'cloud' can set up a gravitational field. Added confirmation is the ice cube in the air that we saw. Martin's plane was probably landed and our tractor pulled out of the crevice in the same fashion. The following inferences may be classed as beyond question: the 'cloud' readily changes its shape and colour. This you have seen. It

creates any temperature regime needed: hundred-metre-thick ice can be cut only by using very high temperatures. It floats in the air like a fish in water and can change direction and speed instantaneously. Martin claims that the 'cloud' he saw escaped from him at hypersonic speed. His 'colleagues' obviously went slow simply to create a gravitational barrier around the airplane. The ultimate conclusion can only be that the rose 'clouds' have nothing whatsoever to do with meteorological phenomena. This 'cloud' is either a living thinking organism or a biosystem with a specific programme. Its principal tasks are to remove and transport into space enormous masses of continental ice. And incidentally for some unknown reason and in some unknown way it synthesizes (I would rather say duplicates or models) any thing it encounters (atomic structures such as human beings, machines and other things) and then destroys them.

The American Admiral Tompson asked Zernov the first question:

"There is one thing that is not clear to me from your report, and that is, whether these creatures are hostile or not towards human beings."

"I do not think so. They destroy only the copies they themselves have created."

"Are you positive?"

"But you've just seen that yourself," Zernov replied in surprise.

"I would like to know whether you are sure that the destroyed creatures are definitely copies and not the people themselves? If the copies are identical with the human beings, then who will

prove to me that my pilot Martin is indeed my pilot Martin and not his atomic model?"

The exchange was in English but many in the hall understood or translated for their neighbours. Nobody smiled, the question was indeed terrifying. Even Zernov seemed at a loss as he searched for an answer.

I pulled down Martin who had jumped up and said:

"I can assure you, Admiral, that I am indeed I, the photography man of the expedition, Yuri Anokhin, and not a cloud-created model. When I shot the film, my double retreated to the Sno-Cat as if hypnotized. You could see that on the screen. He told me that somebody or something was forcing him to return to the cabin. Apparently he was already prepared for elimination." I watched the glistening spectacles of the Admiral and almost burst with anger.

"That is possible," he said, "though it is not very convincing. I have a question for Martin. Please stand up, Martin."

The pilot rose to his full two-metre height of a veteran basketball player.

"Yes, sir. I wiped out the copy with my own two hands."

The Admiral smiled.

"Now suppose the copy finished you off?" He moved his lips a bit before adding: "You attempted to shoot when you thought about the aggressive intentions of the 'cloud', right?"

"Yes, I did, sir. Two bursts with tracer bullets."

"Any results?"

"No, sir, no results. Like a shot gun against an avalanche of snow."

"Now suppose you had a different weapon? Say a flame thrower or napalm?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Would it have refused to clash?"

"I do not think so, sir."

"Sit down, Martin. Don't be offended, I am only trying to clarify some of the details of Mr. Zernov's report that worry me. Thank you for your explanations, gentlemen."

The persistence of the Admiral untied all tongues. Questions followed one another as fast as they could be answered, like at a press conference. "You said that ice masses are being transported into space. Do you mean the atmosphere or outer space?"

"If it is into atmospheric space, I don't see the purpose. What is there to do with ice in the atmosphere?"

"Will humanity allow for this mass-scale plundering of ice?"

"Does anyone need glaciers here on the earth?"

"What will happen to a continent freed from ice? Will the level of the ocean rise?"

"Will the climate change?"

"Not all at once, comrades," Zernov implored rising his arms. "One at a time. Into what space? I assume it is cosmic space. Glaciers are only needed in the terrestrial atmosphere for glaciologists. Generally speaking, I thought scientists were people with higher education. But judging from the questions, I am beginning to doubt the axiomatic nature of that proposition. How can the water level in the ocean increase if there is no increase in water? That's school geography,

and the same goes for the climate question too."

"What, in your opinion, is the presumed structure of the 'cloud'? To me it seemed to be a gas."

"A thinking gas," someone giggled. "From what textbook is that?"

"Are you a physicist?" Zernov asked.

"Well, assuming that I am."

"Suppose you write a textbook."

"Unfortunately, I have no experience in the show business. But my question is serious."

"And I'm serious in my answer. I do not know the structure of the 'cloud'. It might even be that the physico-chemical structure is totally unknown to our science. I think that it is more of a colloidal structure than gaseous."

"Where do you think it came from?"

The correspondent of "Izvestia" I knew got up.

"In some kind of a science fiction novel I read about visitors from Pluto. Incidentally, in the Antarctic too. Do you really take that as a serious possibility?"

"I don't know. While I'm on the subject, I never said anything about Pluto."

"It may not be Pluto, what I meant was from outer space as such. From some kind of stellar system. Why should they be coming to the earth for ice? To the outskirts of our Galaxy. There is certainly enough ice in the Universe, one could try some place a bit closer."

"Closer to what?" Zernov asked and smiled.

I admired him. He still retained some humour and calm even under this veritable barrage of

questions. He had not made a scientific discovery, but was only an accidental witness to a unique, unexplained phenomenon, about which he hardly knew more than those who had seen the film. For some reason they kept forgetting that and he patiently responded to every remark.

"Ice is water," he said in the tone of a tired teacher winding up a lesson. "It is a compound that is not so often met with even in our own stellar system. We do not know whether there is water on Venus, there is very little on Mars and none whatsoever on Jupiter or Uranus. And of course there is not so very much terrestrial ice in the Universe. If I err, the astronomers will correct me, but it seems to me that cosmic ice is merely frozen gases: ammonia, methane, carbon dioxide, nitrogen."

"Why doesn't anyone ask about duplicates, doubles?" I whispered and immediately got myself into a lot of work.

Professor Kedrin recalled me:

"I have a question for Anokhin. Did you converse with your duplicate? And I wonder what about?"

"Yes, we did, we talked about a variety of things," I said.

"Did you notice any difference, purely external, say, in fine points, in hardly noticeable details? I refer to differences between the two of you."

"None in the least. Our blood was even the same." Then I told them about the microscope.

"How about memory? Recalling things from childhood and later. Did you check that?"

I related everything about memory. What I

couldn't understand was what he was trying to get at. But he explained himself:

"The question that Admiral Thompson asked, is a disturbing one, frightening even, and it should put us on our guard. If duplicates of human beings are going to put in appearances in the future and if, say, duplicates appear that are not destroyed, then how are we to distinguish between a person and his model? What is more, how will they themselves distinguish each other? I believe that is a matter not so much of absolute identity, but of the confidence of each that precisely he is the real person and not the synthesized one."

I recalled my own arguments with my ill-fated double and was completely lost. Zernov saved me.

"A curious item," he said, "the doubles always appear following one and the same dream. The person seems to be immersed in a red or crimson (violet sometimes) cold jelly-like substance that is always very thick. This undisclosed substance fills the person up completely, all his internal organs, all vessels. I cannot assert definitely that the filling takes place, but the person seems to be convinced of it. He lies totally incapable of moving, as if paralyzed, and begins to experience sensations akin to those of one hypnotized: as if someone invisible were probing his mind, going through every cell of his brain. Then the crimson darkness vanishes, his mind clears and his movements come back. He believes that he has had an absurd and horrible dream. In a short time, the double is at large. But after waking

up, the person has had time to do something and to say something, to think something. The double does not know this. When Anokhin woke up he found two vehicles and not one, both with the same dent in the front window and with the same welded piece of metal on the tractor tread. For his double, this was a discovery. He only remembered what Anokhin remembered prior to immersion in the crimson work. There were similar discrepancies in the other cases as well. After waking up, Dyachuk shaved and cut himself. His double appeared without the cut. Chokheli went to sleep drunk from the glass of alcohol he had swallowed, but he got up sober, with a clear mind. Now the duplicate appeared before him drunk, he could hardly stand up, his eyes were misty, actually he was in a state of delirium tremens. I think that in the future it will be precisely this period of action of the person immediately after waking up from the 'crimson dream' that will help, in doubtful cases, to distinguish the original from the copy if other ways have not been found by then."

"Did you also have a dream of that nature?" someone asked in the hall.

"Yes, I did."

"But you did not have a double?"

"That is exactly what is worrying me. Why I turned out to be the exception."

"You were not an exception," Zernov's own voice answered him.

The speaker stood behind the others, nearly in the doorway, dressed somewhat differently from Zernov. The other one had on a splendid

grey suit, while this one had on an old dark-green sweater, the one Zernov always wore on expeditions. But Zernov's padded pants and Canadian fur boots, which I envied during our trips, completed the dress of the stranger. Yet he was hardly a stranger, when you come to think of it. Even I, who had spent so many days alongside Zernov, could not distinguish one from the other. Zernov was on the stage, but in the doorway stood a precise, perfect copy. That is definite.

The hall gasped, somebody stood up, looking from one to the other in bewilderment, someone else stood with his mouth open. Kedrin, with puckered eyebrows, concentrating, examined the double with interest; a snake-like snigger appeared on the lips of the American Admiral; he was obviously pleased at the unexpected confirmation of his idea. It seemed to me that Zernov himself was rather pleased too, the doubts and fears of whom had so suddenly been brought to consummation.

"Come over here," he said almost gaily, "I've been waiting for just such a meeting. Let's have a talk. It'll be of interest not only to us."

Zernov's double unhurriedly walked over to the stage accompanied by inquisitive eyes full of excitement and interest that are accorded only rare celebrities. He turned around, pulled up a chair and sat down near the table at which Zernov had been carrying on a running commentary of the film. The spectacle somehow seemed very natural: here were twin brothers meeting after a long separation. The only difference was that everyone knew that there had been no separa-

tion and these were no brothers. Simply one of the two was a miracle beyond the comprehension of human beings. But which one? Now I realized what Admiral Thompson meant.

"Why didn't you show up during the trip? I was expecting it," said Zernov Number One.

Zernov Number Two, perplexed, just shrugged his shoulders.

"I remember everything prior to that rose-coloured dream. Then there is a hiatus, a gap. Then here I am entering this hall, and listening and watching and it seems to me that I have begun to understand things." He looked at Zernov and smiled ironically. "How much alike we are, after all!"

"I foresaw that," said Zernov shrugging.

"But I didn't. If we had met like Anokhin and his double, I would not have given away the priority. Who would have proven that you are the real one and I am only a reproduction? The point is that I am you, I remember all my (or your)—now I don't even know which—life, right down to the most minute detail, even better than you perhaps: most likely a synthesized memory is fresher. Anton Kuzmich—he turned to the audience—do you remember our conversation just before departure? Not about the problems of experimentation, just the words we exchanged. Do you remember?"

Professor Kedrin was definitely perplexed:

"I don't remember."

"I don't either," said Zernov.

"You knocked your cigarette holder on a packet of cigarettes," said Zernov Number Two without the slightest touch of superiority, "and

you said 'I want to give up smoking, Boris. Beginning with tomorrow, that's definite'."

Laughter broke out because Professor Kedrin was munching a cigarette that had already died out.

"I have a question," it was Admiral Thompson.

"I would like to ask Mr. Zernov in the green sweater. Do you remember our meeting at MacMurdo?"

"Of course," said Zernov the Second in English.

"And the souvenir that you liked so much?"

"Of course," Zernov Two answered. "You presented me with a fountain pen with your initials in gold. I have it in my room, in the pocket of my summer jacket."

"My summer jacket," Zernov corrected him sardonically.

"You would not have convinced me of it if I had not seen your film. Now I know: I did not return with you on the tractor, I did not meet the American pilot, and the death of his double I only saw in the film. I expect the same end for myself, I foresee it."

"Perhaps you are an exception," said Zernov, "it may be that you will be granted existence."

Now I saw the difference between them. One spoke calmly without losing any of his composure, the other was all wound up inside and tense. Even his lips trembled, as if it were difficult for him to say what his mind was thinking.

"You yourself do not believe in it," he said, "we are created as an experiment and are eliminated as a product of the experiment. Why, is not known to anyone, you or me. I remember

Anokhin's story via your memory, via our combined memory, that is how and why I remember it." He looked at me and inside I shuddered as I met the so familiar look. "When the cloud started to descend, Anokhin told his double to run. The double refused, he could not, he said, for something was ordering him to remain. And he returned to the cabin to die: we all saw that. The difference is that you can stand up and leave, whereas I cannot do that. Something has already ordered me not to move."

Zernov extended his hand and it came up against an invisible barrier.

"Nothing can be done," sadly smiled Zernov the Double. "It's a field, I'm using your terminology, since like you I know no other. The field has already been set up. I'm in it like in a spacesuit."

Somebody sitting nearby also tried to touch the synthesized man but couldn't because his hand encountered compressed air as hard as wood.

"It is terrible to know of your own end and not to have any way of putting it off," said Zernov's counterpart. "After all, I am a man and not just a biological mass. I so terribly want to live—"

The horrible silence pressed down on the hall. Someone was breathing heavily like an asthmatic. Somebody else had covered his eyes with his hand. Admiral Thompson had taken off his glasses. I screwed up my eyes.

Martin's hand that had been on my knee trembled.

"Look up!" he cried.

I looked up and froze stiff: there was a violet pulsating trunk-like affair dropping down the ceiling to the Zernov sitting perfectly still in the green sweater. Its funnel widened and frothed, unhurriedly but firmly, like an empty hood, and covered up the man beneath it. A minute later we saw something like a jelly stalactite violet in colour that merged with a similar stalagmite. The base of the stalagmite rested on the stage near the table, the stalactite flowed out of the ceiling through the roof and the almost three metres of snow covering it. In another half minute the frothing edge of the trunk, or pipe, began to turn upwards and in the empty rosiness of its inside we no longer could see either chair or man. In another minute, violet foam had gone through the roof as if something immaterial, without damaging either the plastic or the thermal insulation.

"That's all," said Zernov rising to his feet. "Finis, as the ancient Romans used to say."

Part two

THE CREATION

OF THE WORLD

Chapter IX

"THE END OF THE 'TITANIC' "

In Moscow I had hard luck. I had got through the fierce Antarctic winter without even having sneezed in sixty degrees below zero, but back here in Moscow I came down with a cold in the autumn slush when the thermometer had hardly dropped to zero outside the window. True, by next Tuesday the doctor said I'd be up and around and my own self again, but Sunday morning I was still lying with mustard plasters on my back and unable to go downstairs for the newspapers. Tolya Dyachuk brought me the papers. He was my first visitor Sunday morning. And though he did not take any part in our fussing with the rose clouds and immediately returned to his weather-forecast institute and his charts of the

winds and cyclones, I was sincerely happy that he did come. The anxious events that we had both gone through just a month before were still deeply felt. And Tolya was an easy-going convenient guest. One could be totally silent in his presence and think one's own thoughts without any risk of offending him, and his jokes and exaggerations would never offend his host. So the guest ensconced himself in a chair near the window and strummed on the guitar purring to himself one of his own compositions while the host lay patiently enduring the stings of the mustard and recalling his last day at Mirny and the try-out of the new helicopter that had just arrived from Moscow.

Kostya Ozhogin had arrived at Mirny with a fresh group of polar workers and had only the faintest idea about the rose clouds. Our acquaintance began as he begged me to show him at least a little bit of my film. I showed him a whole reel. He responded by offering me a seat in the new high-speed helicopter during a trial run out over the ocean. The next morning—my last at Mirny—he came over and told me in secret about some kind of “very terrible thing”. His helicopter had been out on the ice all night, about fifty metres from the edge, where the ship “Ob” was moored. Here is the way he described it: “We were celebrating a bit, had been drinking, not much, and before going to bed I went out to take a look at the machine. There were two there, one next to the other. I figured another one had been unloaded and went back to sleep. In the morning there was only one again. So I asked the engineer where the other

one had gone, and he burst out laughing. 'Hey, you drank too much, you were seeing double. How much did you guys put away?' "

I was rather suspicious about the true criminals of this splitting, but I didn't say anything. What I did was I brought along my camera, I had a hunch it might come in useful. Which it did. We were about three-hundred metres above the ocean at the very edge of the ice. We could clearly see the unloaded boxes and machines, the small pieces of broken ice at the shore and the blue icebergs out in the pure water. The biggest towered up a few kilometres from the coast line, but did not float or bob on the waves—it was sitting firmly in the water fixed securely to the bottom. We called it 'The End of the Titanic' in memory of the famous liner that collided with a colossal iceberg at the beginning of the century. This one was even larger. Our glaciologists calculated that it was roughly three thousand square kilometres in area. That was the goal of the Disney characters that had stretched out single file across the sky.

I began to film without waiting for a close approach. They were flying at the same altitude as we were, they were rose-coloured without a single spot and resembled dirigibles at the tail end of a column. From the front they were like boomerangs or swept-back airplane wings. "Shall we turn back?" said Ozhogin in a whisper. "We can put on speed." "Why?" I sniggered. "You can't get away from them anyway." I could sense the tension in Ozhogin's muscles, but I didn't know whether it was due to fear or excitement. He asked: "Are they going to start split-

ting?" "No, they're not going to." "How do you know?" "Because they duplicated your helicopter last night, you yourself saw it," I replied. He didn't say anything.

Meanwhile the column had approached the iceberg. Three rosy dirigibles hung in the air, getting redder and opening up their familiar saucer-like stemless poppies, motionless at the corners of an enormous triangle over the island of ice; then the swept-wing boomerangs plunged downwards. They went into the water like fish, no splash, no sound, only white spurts of steam encircled the iceberg. Probably the temperature gradient between the new substance and the water was too great. Then all was calm. The poppies flowered over the island and the boomerangs disappeared. I waited patiently while the helicopter slowly circled over the iceberg a bit below the poppies hanging in the sky.

"What's going to happen now?" Ozhogin asked hoarsely. "Is this the end?" "I don't think so," I replied cautiously. About ten minutes must have passed. Suddenly the mountain of ice shook mightily and then slowly rose out of the water. "Let's go," I yelled to Kostya. He understood and swung our plane to the side, away from the dangerous orbit. The bluish hunk of ice, scintillating in the sun, had already risen above the water. It was so large that it was difficult to find any comparison. Imagine an enormous mountain cut off at the base and rising upwards like a toy balloon. It gleamed and glistened shimmering in a million colours of molten sapphires and emeralds sprinkled all over it. This was a scene you could sell your soul to the devil for. I was the

king. Only Ozhogin and I and the astronomers of Mirny witnessed this incomparable spectacle. A miracle of ice rose out of the water, came to a halt over the three crimson poppies and then hurtled off into the depths of cosmic space. The "boomerangs" slithered out of the water in a jet of steam and turned towards the continent in regular order. The route lay through the foam of cumulus clouds. Like horsemen they galloped.

Horsemen!

The simile came later, and it was not concocted by me but right now I heard it from Tolya strumming on his guitar.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"The song, naturally," he explained.

"What song," I still couldn't get it all straight.

"So you weren't listening," he sighed. "Exactly what I thought. I'll have to sing it again."

He started up in his long drawn out talk-sing voice, like a chansonnier without a voice that hangs onto the microphone for dear life. I didn't know then what an envious fate awaited this composition of accidental celebrity.

"Horsemen from nowhere, what's that? A dream? A myth? All of a sudden, while awaiting a wonder ... the world froze silently still. And over the rhythmical drone and pulse of the world, horsemen from nowhere pranced by ... True, the idea is not new and the theme of the tragedy is simple. Hamlet again solving the eternal problem. Who are they? Human beings? Gods? The snow melts slowly, and again the Earth is anxious, there is no breathing spell—"

He paused for a moment and then continued in a major key.

"Who will recognize them? And will we be able to grasp them? It is late, my friend, it is late, and there is no one we can blame. Only the difficult thing to grasp, my friend, is that there they are again—the horsemen from nowhere prancing by in ordered array."

He sighed and glanced in my direction waiting for some sign of appreciation.

"Not so bad," I said, "As a song goes, but—"

"But what?" he queried guardedly.

"Where does the Spanish sadness come from? Why the pessimism?" And I started, 'It is late, my friend, it is late,' "Why late? And what is late? And what's this about blame? Are you sorry about the ice, or the doubles? Better take off this mustard plaster, it's not burning any more."

Tolya peeled it off my suffering back and said: "Incidentally, they've been seen in the Arctic too."

"That must be terrifying, those horsemen from nowhere."

"You said it. In Greenland they've been cutting up ice too. Telegrams have come in."

"So what, it might get warmer, that's all."

"But what if they take all the ice there is on the Earth? In the Arctic, the Antarctic, in the mountains and the oceans?"

"You ought to know, you're the climatologist. I guess we'll be able to fish for sardines in the White Sea and plant oranges in Greenland."

"In theory," Tolya sighed. "Who can predict what will really happen? Nobody. It's not the ice that worries me. You read what Tompson has to

say. TASS has given it in full." He pointed to a bunch of papers.

"Getting panicky?"

"That's not the word!"

"He was nervous enough there in Mirny, remember?"

"Yea, he's a tough nut. He'll keep things mixed up for quite some time. For both sides. By the way, he was the one who used the phrase Lysovsky coined: 'horsemen from nowhere'."

"Horsemen from nowhere? But that's what you thought up," I recalled.

"Yes, but who multiplied it?"

Special correspondent of "Izvestia" Lysovsky, returning from Mirny, was the author of an article dealing with the rose "clouds" that was taken up by all the newspapers of the world. That's what he called them: horsemen from nowhere. Tolya was the real inventor, though. He was the one who yelled out "horsemen, really, horsemen". "Where from?" someone asked. "I don't know, from nowhere." Then Lysovsky repeated it aloud: "Horsemen from nowhere. Not bad for a headline."

Tolya and I looked at each other. That's exactly the way it had been.

Chapter X

THE PHANTOM AIRCRAFT

What actually happened?

Our jet liner was in flight from the ice aerodrome of Mirny to the shores of South Africa.

Below us were white wisps of cloud like a field of snow near a railway station: locomotive soot sprinkled about on fresh snow. The clouds moved apart occasionally and windows would open up displaying the steel surface of the ocean far below.

All of us who had gotten used to one another during the winter were gathered in the cabin—geologists, pilots, glaciologists, astronomers, aerologists. Our guests were only a few newspaper reporters, but it was soon quite forgotten that they were guests and they gradually dissolved into a homogeneous mass of Antarctic workers of yesterday. The talk turned to the rose clouds, of course, but not seriously, in a bantering manner with jokes and wisecracks most of the time. The usual excited cabin conversations of a home-returning trip.

All of a sudden some rose-coloured “boomerangs” appeared out of the clouds, jumping in and out like horsemen in the steppe. That was when the “horsemen” phrase came up, though they naturally had been compared with most anything because they were constantly changing shape, which they did instantaneously and for reasons that we could not fathom. That is exactly what happened this time too. Six or seven of them, I don’t remember precisely, rose up in front of us, spread out in the form of crimson pancakes and enveloped the plane in an impenetrable crimson cocoon. To the credit of our pilot, it must be said, he did not falter but continued to fly as if nothing had happened: if it’s got to be a cocoon, then let it be one!

An ominous silence set in in the cabin. Every-

one expected something to happen, glanced from one to the other, and feared to speak at all. The red fog seeped through the walls. Nobody could figure out how that could be. It would seem that no material barriers existed, or that it was nonmaterial, illusory, existing only in one's imagination. But it soon filled the cabin and only strange crimson spots revealed the passengers in front or behind. "Do you know what this's all about," I heard the voice of Lysovsky from the other side of the aisle. "You don't happen to feel as if someone were looking into your brain and going right through you, do you?" That was my question in reply to his question. He was silent for a moment probably trying to figure out whether I was going mad from fear, and then added hesitatingly: "Nn-o, I don't think so." Then somebody next to him said: "It's just a fog, that's all." I didn't think so either. What was happening in the plane didn't at all resemble the sensations in the tractor and in the tent. In the former case somebody or something peered deep inside me, probed imperceptibly in my body as if determining the arrangement and number of particles that make up my bioessence, in this way reproducing a model of me; in the latter case, the process had stopped half way, as if the creator of the model knew that my model had already been made. I was now surrounded by a fog, crimson-like, just as opaque as turbid water in a jar, neither cold nor warm and totally imperceptible, for it did not smart my eyes nor tickle the nose. It coursed round me and did not even appear to touch the skin, then it gradually melted or floated away. I soon began to see hands, clothes, the seats and people sitting in

them nearby. Then I heard a voice from behind: "How long did that take? Did you notice?" "No, I didn't look at my watch, I don't know." Neither did I know, it might have been three or perhaps ten minutes.

This was when we saw something still more bizarre. Squint, pressing your eyes strongly on the lids, and objects will appear to double up, producing, as it were, a copy that floats away out of the field of view. That is what happened to all the things in the aircraft, everything in our field of view. Not hazily, but very clearly, I saw—later I found out that everyone saw the same thing—a duplicate of our cabin and all its contents gradually separate itself—the floor, the windows, seats and passengers. It rose half a meter and then floated off. I saw myself, Tolya and his guitar, Lysovsky, and I noticed Lysovsky trying to grab his reproduction that was floating away. All he got was the air. I saw the outside of the cabin, not the inside; I saw the outer wall go right through the real wall, followed by the wing that slipped through us like an enormous shadow of the aircraft. Then all this vanished from view as if it had evaporated in the air. Yet it did not vanish and it did not evaporate. We rushed to the windows and saw an identical copy of our plane flying alongside, absolutely identical, just off the production line, but it was no illusory machine because Lysovsky collected his wits fast enough to take a photograph, which was published and definitely showed the new plane to be a duplicate of our liner taken at a distance of 10 metres.

Unfortunately, what happened later was not photographed. Lysovsky ran out of film and I

was late in getting to my camera, which had been stowed away. This was the aerial wonder that was enacted before our eyes: a familiar crimson cocoon enveloped the duplicate plane, elongated, growing dark red, then violet and then melted away. Nothing remained—no plane, no cocoon. Only the whitish wisps of cloud floating below us as before.

The chief pilot stepped out of the pilot's cabin a few minutes later and asked shyly: "Perhaps someone can explain what occurred just now." Nobody volunteered, he waited a moment and then added, with an ironical sting: "That's scientists for you. Wonders, miracles—but we're told miracles just don't happen." Someone put in: "I guess they do." Everybody laughed. Then Lysovsky turned to Zernov: "Perhaps Comrade Zernov has an explanation?" "I'm no god or oracle," Zernov replied gruffly. "The 'clouds' produced a duplicate plane, that you all saw. I don't know any more than you do about the how and why of it all." "Am I to write that?" asked Lysovsky. "Sure, go ahead and write it," Zernov cut him off and fell silent.

He brought up the subject once more, after we landed in Karachi, when we had both forced our way through the crowds of newsmen that had come to meet us: our radio operator had sent a radiogram about the event from the plane. While newsmen with cameras attacked the crew of our plane, Zernov and I slipped through to the cafe for a bite and a drink. I recall asking him something, but he did not answer. Later, as if answering anxious thoughts and not me, he said:

"That's a totally different method of model-building, the procedure is quite different."

"You speaking about the 'horsemen'?" I asked.

"That word would stick," he smiled ironically. "Everywhere, both here and in the West too, I imagine. You'll see. Yet the duplication procedure was absolutely unlike anything ever," he added deep in thought.

I didn't get it: "The plane, you mean?"

"Don't think so. The airplane was probably duplicated in full. And in the same manner. First nonmaterially, illusorily, and then materially—that is the entire atomic structure with exactitude. People are handled differently: only the outer form, the shell, the function of the passenger. What does a passenger do? He sits in his seat, looks out the window, drinks juice and turns the pages of a book. I hardly think the psychic workings of the human beings were reproduced in all their complexity. Of course that is not necessary anyway. What was needed was a living, acting model of the aircraft with living and acting passengers. That's only a surmise naturally."

"But what's the idea of destroying the model?"

"Why are duplicates eliminated?" was Zernov's counter query. "Remember the farewell of my twin? I still can't get it out of my mind."

He fell silent and stopped answering my questions. It was only when we left the restaurant and were passing by Lysovsky surrounded by at least a dozen foreign newspaper men that Zernov smiled and said:

"He's sure to serve up some 'horsemen' for them. It'll get around, you just wait. They'll have

the Apocalypse and pale horsemen and black ones carrying death. Oh, there'll be everything. You know your Bible? Well, if you don't, read it and compare when the time comes."

His prediction came true in every detail. I nearly jumped out of bed when, together with telegrams about the appearance of rose clouds in Alaska and in the ~~Himalayas~~, Dyachuk read me a translation of an article by Admiral Tompson from a New York paper. Even the terminology that Zernov had laughed at coincided fully with that of the Admiral.

Wrote the Admiral: "Somebody gave them a catchy name, the 'horsemen', but, whoever it was, failed to hit the bull's eye. They are no simple horsemen, they are horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is no accidental comparison. Recall the words of the prophet:

"...and I looked, and behold a pale horse; and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given into them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death..."

Fellow Americans will have to excuse me if I resort more to the terminology of a Catholic Church Cardinal than to that of a retired navy man. But I'm compelled to, for humanity is meeting these uninvited guests with much too much complacency." The Admiral was not interested to know where they came from, Sirius or Alpha Centauri. Neither was he worried about the terrestrial ice that was being carried off into outer space. What he was afraid of were the duplicates. Even back in Mirny he had doubts about whether the duplicates or real human beings

were being destroyed. Now this same idea was expressed aggressively and with assurance: "... the duplicates and humans would appear to be completely identical. The same exterior, the same memory and the same thinking process. But who will prove to me that the identity of thinking has no limits beyond which begin subservience to the will of the creators." The more I listened the more astonished I was at the author's fanatical bias: he even rejected a neutral study and observation and demanded a most energetic attack on the visitors to expell them with all the means at our disposal. The article ended with a completely bizarre supposition: "If I suddenly betray myself by recanting what I have just written, then I am the duplicate and I myself have been substituted. Then you can hang me on the first street lantern."

It was not only the meaning that was remarkable, but the very tone of the article. Those given to believing sensational news items might indeed be thoroughly frightened by this apparently sensible but definitely prejudiced man. What is more, it might be utilized for very unseemly purposes by unscrupulous people in politics and in science. It is to the credit of the Admiral that he did not seek their support and did not borrow any weapons from the arsenal of anticommunism.

When I explained my reasoning to Tolya, he said:

"The Admiral's article is only a special problem. Something quite different arises, if you ask me. Up till now, when scientists or science-fiction writers touched on the probability of encounters

with other intelligence in outer space, they were interested in the problem of friendly or hostile attitudes of such intelligence towards terrestrial humans. But it never entered anyone's mind to ponder the possibility of a hostile attitude of humans towards such intelligence. Yet that is precisely the problem. Switch on your transistor at night and you'll go crazy. The whole world is excited, it's on every wavelength. The Pope, ministers, senators, astrologers—they're all working the waves. Flying saucers are nothing. Parliaments are being questioned."

That was something to think about indeed. Tolya occasionally said sensible things.

Chapter XI

THEY SEE, HEAR AND SENSE

The problem that Tolya had brought up was discussed at a special session of the Academy of Sciences, I was present as the person who filmed the space visitors. A lot was said, but probably the most talked-about subject was the nature of the phenomenon and its peculiarities. This again launched me into the orbit of rose "clouds".

I arrived at the meeting about an hour before time so as to check the projector, the screen and the sound. The film now had an accompanying text. In the conference hall I found the stenographer Irene Fateyeva, who had been spoken of as the future secretary of a ~~special~~ commission to be set up by the session. I was also warned that she was a cobra, a polyglot and an I-know-it-all type. You can ask her what would happen if you

dipped a solution of potassium chloride on an exposed brain and she'll give you the answer, so they say. Or you can ask about the fourth state of matter, or what topology does, and she has answers. But I didn't ask about anything. All I needed was to look at her once, and I believed it.

She had on a dark blue sweater with a very strict abstract ornamentation, and her hair was done in a tightly bound bun, though it was not at all the fashion of the 19th century. She wore dark, narrow, rectangular frameless eyeglasses. The eyes that peered from behind them were clever, attentive, demanding. True, I didn't see the eyes when I came in: she was writing in a notebook and did not lift her head.

I coughed.

"Don't cough, Anokhin, and don't stand in the middle of the room," she said without lifting her head, "I know you, I know all about you, so we don't have to get acquainted formally. Sit down some place and wait a few minutes till I get this synopsis finished."

"What's a synopsis?" I asked.

"Don't try to be more ignorant than you already are. You don't have to know the synopsis of the session, since you weren't invited."

"To what?" I asked again.

"To the Council of Ministers. We showed your film there yesterday."

I knew about that but didn't say anything. The rectangular glasses turned in my direction. I thought she would be prettier without spectacles.

She removed her glasses.

"Now's when I'm beginning to believe in telepathy," I said.

She rose. She was really tall, like a basketball player.

"So you've come to check up on the apparatus, Anokhin, the tension of the screen and the volume control for sound? That's all been done."

"Listen, what's topology any way?" I asked.

The eyes behind the glasses did not have time to reduce me to ashes because some of the conferees had come in. No one was going to be late to the show. The quorum was there in a quarter of an hour. There was no preamble. The chairman asked Zernov whether there would be an introductory word? "What for?" was the question in reply. Then the lights went out and the blue sky of the Antarctic came on the screen and a crimson bell began to swell up.

This time I did not need to give the commentary because it had been recorded. Unlike the showing at Mirny that was watched in a tense silence, this meeting more resembled a group of friends watching TV. Time and again remarks came right on the heels of the announcer, some humorous, others only comprehensible to the initiated of the particular science; at other times, they were like the piercing thrusts of a fencer. Then again, light banter came in. I remembered a bit. When the crimson flower swallowed my duplicate together with the tracked vehicle, somebody's gay bass voice exclaimed:

"Who claims man as the crown of creation, raise your hand!"

There was laughter. The same voice continued:

"Bear in mind ~~one undebatable thing~~: no

| model-building system can construct a model of a structure that is more complicated than itself."

When the edge of the flower turned up and frothed, I heard:

"Foam, isn't it? What are the components? Gas? Liquid? What's the foam-forming substance?"

"Are you sure that that is foam?"

"I'm not sure of anything."

"Maybe it's plasma at low temperature?"

"Plasma's a gas, so what would contain it?"

"A magnetic trap. A magnetic field can generate the needed walls."

"Nonsense, colleague. Why doesn't a dispersed aphemeral gas disintegrate or drift away under the action of a field? The point is that it's not a forceless field in the sense that it does not strive to change its form."

"How do you think clouds of interstellar gas form magnetic fields?"

Another voice in the dark said:

"The field pressure is variable. Hence the variability of form."

"The form, yes, but the colour?"

I was sorry I had not brought along a tape recorder. But then the hall was silent for a few moments: the screen displayed another giant flower eating up an aircraft, and a violet snake-like tentacle was tackling the senseless model of Martin. It was still pulsating above the snow when, from the dark, a voice called out:

"I have a question to ask the authors of the plasm hypothesis. So you think both the airplane and the man burnt up in the gas jet, in the magnetic trap?"

Laughter from in front. Again I regretted forgetting the tape-recorder. "Fire" was being exchanged again.

"Mystical, if you ask me. Improbable."

"No mysticism is needed to recognize a possibility as improbable. All you need is mathematics."

"Paradox. And yours?"

"Mathematics is what we need here more than physics. A ~~mathematician~~ would do more."

"Just what do you picture him doing?"

"He doesn't need any samples, just more pictures. And what will he see? Geometric figures distorted in all manner of ways, no tearing and no folding. Strictly problems in topology."

"Excuse me, but who's going to solve the problem of the composition of the rose-coloured biomass?"

"So you consider it a mass?"

"I cannot, on the basis of these coloured pictures, consider it to be a thinking organism."

"Processing of information is obvious."

"Processing of information does not yet make it a synonym of thinking."

This tit-for-tat continued. The hall got really excited when the ice symphony came on—clouds sawing, huge bars of ice rising in the blue sky.

"Look at them stretch, will you! A kilometre-long pancake out of a three-metre cloudlet."

"That's not a pancake, it's a knife."

"I don't get it."

"Why? Only one gram of substance in a colloidal dispersed state possesses a vast surface area."

"So it's a substance?"

"It's hard to make a definite statement. What kind of data have we? What do they say about the biosystem? How does it react to the environment? Only via a field? And what controls it?"

"And to that the question of where it gets its power. Where does it store the energy? What kind of transformers ensure conversion?"

"Then there's the ..."

That was the end of the film, no more commentary, the lights went up and there was total silence, the light seeming to call for the customary cautiousness in judgements. The chairman, Academician Osovets, caught the mood immediately:

"This is not a symposium, comrades, and not a meeting of academicians," he reminded them in calm tones. "We who are gathered here represent a special committee set up by the Government with the following aims: to determine the nature of the rose 'clouds', their purpose in coming to the earth, the aggressiveness or friendliness of their intentions, and to contact them in some way if they turn out to be intelligent, thinking creatures. However, what we have seen does not yet permit us to come to any definite conclusions or decisions."

"Why?" came a voice from the hall, a familiar bass voice. "How about the film? The first conclusion is that it is an excellent piece of scientific filming. Invaluable material to start the work. And also a first decision: show the film here and in the West."

All this, I must admit, was very pleasant to hear. And just as pleasant was the Chairman's reply:

"The film was appraised in like manner by the Government as well. And a similar resolution has already been passed. Colleague Anokhin has been included in the working group of our committee. Still and all, the film fails to answer many of our questions: whence, from what corner of the universe did these creatures come, what forms of life are they (~~they can hardly be protein-based~~), what is their physico-chemical structure, and are they living beings, intelligent creatures or bio-robots with specific programmes of action? Many more questions might be asked, some of them will not get answers. Now, at least. But we can conjecture and construct certain working hypotheses, and publish them, and not only in the scientific journals—in all countries of the world people want to know about the rose 'clouds' not from fortune-tellers but in the form of solid scientific information, at least within the limits of what we already know and can safely conjecture. We could, say, speak of the possibilities of contact, about changes in the terrestrial climate associated with the loss of ice, and, what is most important, we might find counter-arguments to the idea of the aggressive nature of this as yet unknown civilization in the form of facts and proof of its loyalty to human civilization."

"Incidentally," began a scientist sitting next to Zernov, "one thing might be added to what has been said in the press. There is very little deuterium in ordinary water, but ice and melted snow contain a still smaller percentage, which means they are biologically more active. It is also a fact that water acted upon by a magnetic field

changes its fundamental physico-chemical properties. Now terrestrial glaciers represent water that has already been subjected to the earth's magnetic field. It might possibly be—who knows—that this will shed some light on the aims of the new-comers."

"Actually, I'm interested more in their other aim, though I'm a glaciologist," Zernov remarked. "Why they construct models of everything they see is understandable; such specimens would be useful in the study of terrestrial life. But why do they destroy them?"

"I'll risk an explanation," Osovets let his eyes stray over the hall. Like a lecturer who is asked a question, he did not answer Zernov alone. "Suppose that they carry with them not a model but only the notation of its structure. And to obtain such, let us say it is required to break the model down, to decompose it into its molecular constituents, perhaps even down to the atomic level. They do not wish to harm human beings and destroy them or the creatures they construct. Hence the synthesis and subsequent elimination (after a trial) of the model."

—"That makes them friends and not aggressors, doesn't it?" someone asked.

"Yes, that's what I think," the Academician answered with caution. "We'll just have to live and see."

There were a lot of questions, some I understood, others I forgot. But one of Irene's questions posed to Zernov I did remember.

"Professor, you said that they construct models of all things. That they see. Where are their eyes? How do they see?"

The answer came not from Zernov but from a physicist next to him.

"Eyes are not obligatory," he explained. "They can reproduce any object via photography. Say, create a light-sensitive surface just as they create any field, and then focus light on it reflected from the object. That's all. Of course, that is only one of a number of possible suppositions. We might presume an acoustic 'tuning' of a similar kind and an analogous 'tuning' to odours."

"I am convinced that they see everything, hear and sense all things much better than we do," said Zernov with a strange kind of ceremoniousness.

This time nobody even smiled. Zernov's remark appeared to sum up all that had been seen and heard, and revealed to all present the tremendous significance of what had to be thought over and comprehended.

Chapter XII

MARTIN'S LETTER

After Tolya had left I remained standing at the window, my eyes glued to the snowed-over asphalt driveway that connected my entrance door to the gates at the street. I was hoping that Irene might come. Theoretically she could have, not out of any tenderness of heart, naturally, but simply because otherwise she could not give me any news or instructions since I had no telephone. We were now connected by a range of business. She was secretary of this special committee and I was an expert with a variety of du-

ties from press attaché to projectionist. Then we had a joint assignment to go to Paris to an international meeting of scientists devoted to those same rose "clouds"—that impenetrable phenomenon the whole world was talking about. Academician Osovets was head of the delegation and Zernov and I were going as witnesses of the fact, while Irene was in the more modest, though probably even more important role of secretary-translator with a knowledge of six languages. Also in the delegation was Rogovin, world-famous physicist—the bass voice that had so intrigued me during our first showing of the film. The assignment was getting under way, all the documents were ready and only a few days were left before our departure. There were oodles of things to do, all the more so since Zernov had left for Leningrad to see his family and would be back any day now.

But, honestly, that was not the reason I wanted to see Irene. I had simply grown lonely for her during my week of confinement. I wanted to hear her sharp ironical thrusts, even see her dark rectangular glasses that took away some portion of her charm and femininity. I was openly drawn to her—was it friendship or infatuation, or perhaps a vague, almost imperceptible something that attracts one person to another and is so acutely felt when that person is absent. "Do you like her?" I asked myself. "Very much." "What is it, love?" "Don't know." Sometimes I have difficulty with her and at times she makes me mad. At some point the attraction turns into repulsion, and one wants to say something to hurt. That may be because we are so different.

Then the difference sharpens to a razor-edge: as she has put it, my education is a salad made up of Kafka, Hemingway and Bradbury; my reply to that is that hers is a minced pie out of last year's "Technology for the Youth" magazine. Then again I'd just as soon compare her to a dried fish or the Laputan experts. Her response to that is that she condescends to place me with the lower primates. Still and all, we have some things in common. Then we seem to be gay and excited when together.

This is a strange, amusing friendship that was struck up just after that memorable film showing at the Academy of Sciences. I continued sitting in the corner until all the big and little scientists had left and the lights were out. I picked up all the parts and pieces of my equipment, put them into a bag and sat down again.

Irene looked at me, without speaking, through her dark glasses.

"You're not a duplicate by any chance?" she asked.

"I certainly am," I agreed. "How did you guess?"

"By the actions of normal human beings. A normal person, not loaded down with a higher education, would long ago have left, without waiting for the meeting to come to an end. Now here you are, sitting, listening,—why don't you get a move on?"

"I'm studying terrestrial life," I said importantly. "We duplicates are self-programmed systems that vary the programme as we go along depending on the subject, on whether it is worth studying."

"You mean me, I'm the subject?"

"Astounding guess work on your part."

"The session is over. Consider that you've completed the study."

"That's right, now I'll order a model of you with certain corrections."

"Without glasses?"

"That's not all. Without stuck-up superiority and priest-like magnificence. Just an ordinary girl with your wit and face that I'd like to invite to the movies or for a walk."

I hoisted my bag and went to the exit.

"I like movies and walks," she added after me.

I turned round.

Then the next day I returned all spruced up like a diplomatic attaché. She was typing something. I said hello and sat down at her desk.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Looking for work."

"Haven't they assigned you to us yet?"

"They're doing it."

"You have to go through personnel . . ."

"Personnel for me is nothing," I dismissed the matter curtly. "I'm interested in the day-before-yesterday's minutes."

"What for? You wouldn't understand anything in them any way?"

"For one thing, the resolutions passed by the meeting," I continued in a highfalutin manner, paying no attention to her thrusts, "insomuch as we have information that four expeditions are being outfitted for the Arctic, the Caucasus, Greenland and the Himalayas."

"Five," she corrected me. "The fifth is the Fedchenko glacier."

"I'd choose Greenland," I remarked rather by the way.

Then she laughed, as if dealing with a member of the school chess team who is asking for a match with the world champion. I felt lost, of a sudden.

"And where to?"

"Nowhere."

I missed the point.

"Why? Every expedition needs a cameraman."

"I don't like to disappoint you, Yuri, but we don't need one." There'll be scientists and technicians of a number of specialized institutes. The NIKFI for instance. And don't look at me with those kind ram's eyes. Note that I didn't say 'stupid' eyes. I simply ask you: can you operate an introscope? No. Can you photo from behind a wall of opaqueness, say in infrared rays? No. Can you convert the invisible into the visible with the aid of an electronic-acoustic transducer? No, again. I can read it on your carefully shaven face. So you didn't have to shave, after all."

"All right, but how about ordinary camera work?" I still couldn't make it out. "Just common *filmus vulgaris*?"

"For *filmus vulgaris* all one needs is a kid's camera. That's not done any more. More important is to get an image in opaque media, from outside a cloud cover. For example, what happens to a model inside the crimson tube?"

I was silent. For an ordinary cameraman, that was differential calculus.

"So you see, Yuri," she laughed. "You can't do anything. You don't know the Kirlian method, do you?"

I had never even heard of it.

✓“Incidentally, it permits distinguishing the living from the nonliving.”

“I can do that without a camera.”

But she had already taken up the pose of lecturer.

“On film, living tissue is seen surrounded by a transparent halo—discharges of high-frequency currents. The more intensive the vital activities, the brighter the halo.”

“It’s living tissue if it’s naked,” I said angrily and got up. “Forget about personnel. I don’t have anything to do in that department. Here either.”

She laughed, but this time differently: gayly and kindly.

“Sit down, Yuri, and don’t be down-hearted, we’ll go together.”

“Where to?” I was still boiling. “Moscow suburbs?”

“No, to Paris.”

I didn’t believe that sly little devil of a girl till I saw the actual paper for our assignment to the Paris conference. And now, here, I was waiting for the same devil, waiting for the angel, and chewing match sticks with impatience. And I would just miss her when I went over to the desk for cigarettes. She phoned when I was already making plans to throw the whole thing over.

“Jesus,” I exclaimed, “finally!”

She tossed me her raincoat and danced into the room.

“Have you become a believer?”

“From this minute I believe in the angel who

brings forgiveness from heaven. When's it going to be? Don't keep me waiting."

"The day after tomorrow. Zernov returns tomorrow. The next morning we take off. The tickets have been ordered. By the way, how did we get to a first-name basis so quickly?"

Just instinctively. That's not what's worrying you."

She thought for a moment.

"That's true. They're already in the Arctic, you see what I mean. The captain of the 'Dobrynya' icebreaker, Captain Shchetinnikov, just back from Archangel came over to the committee. He says that the vast area of the Kara Sea and the ocean north of Franz-Joseph Land is all free from ice. From Pulkovo Observatory the report is that ice satellites orbit over the North Pole several times a day."

"And the committee rejects filming," I added disappointed. "Now's just the time to photograph."

"Amateurs have been doing that. We'll soon be getting cartloads of film. That's not the important thing."

"What is important?"

"Contact."

I whistled.

"Don't whistle. Attempts at contact have already been made, though without success it seems. But English and Dutch scientists have proposed a programme of contacts. All the materials are in the hands of Osoverts. Then there's this Tompson group that'll have to be dealt with at the congress. The American delegation is actually divided, the majority do not support Tompson, but there are some that are in with him. Not very sol-

idly, true, but they'll be hard nuts to crack in Paris. That's what's important, see? Wait a minute." Laughing, she grabbed her raincoat and pulled from the pocket a bulky package covered over with foreign stamps. "I forgot about the most important thing of all; here's a letter for you from the United States. You're getting to be famous."

"From Martin," I said, looking at the address.

A strange address, to say the least:

"Yuri Anokhin. First observer of the phenomenon of the rose clouds. Committee for Fighting Visitors from Space, Moscow, USSR."

"Committee for fighting ..." Irene laughed. "Some programme for contacts. He's a Tompsonite, all right."

"Here, I'll read it."

Martin wrote that he had returned from the Antarctic expedition to his airbase near Sand City, in the southwest of the United States. On Tompson's suggestion, he was immediately assigned to a voluntary society set up by the Admiral for combating the cosmic visitors. Martin was not surprised at his assignment. Tompson had told him about it in the plane on the way home. Neither was he surprised at the position he was offered. When the Admiral learned that in college Martin had published items in student journals, he named him press agent. "I have a feeling that the old man doesn't believe me, he thinks I'm a double, something like a fifth columnist and so he wants to keep me close by him to see and check for himself. That's why I didn't tell him what happened to me on the way to our airbase in Sand City. But I've got to tell some-

body, and there's nobody but you. You're the only one who can disentangle this crazy house I've gotten into. You and I know what happened at the South Pole; here things seem to be dressed up differently."

The letter was typed, over ten single-spaced pages. "My first article is not for the press, only for you," he wrote. "You'll see for yourself whether I'm fit to be a newspaper man." I went through a couple of pages and nearly jumped.

"Read it," I said to Irene, handing her the pages as I finished them. "It looks like we're in a hot spot."

Chapter XIII

NEW STYLE WESTERN

Here's what Martin wrote:

The sun had just risen over the horizon when I went out the gates of the airbase. I was in a hurry, with only 24 hours of time off, and it was at least an hour's drive to Sand City. I waved gaily to the sleepy watchman, my ancient two-seater jerked forward and I went sailing along the asphalt. Something rattled in the back of the car, then a knock, the cylinders were banging—this was a real piece of junk all right. "About time to get a new one," I thought to myself, "eight years is much too much. But you get into the habit, and Mary likes it too".

That's where I was going, to see Mary in Sand City and spend the last free day I had with her before leaving for New York to report to the Admiral. The boys at the airbase introduced me

to Mary the first day after my return from Mac-Murdo. She was new at this bar, nothing spectacular, a girl like any other girl, in a starched white uniform and Elizabeth Taylor hairdo—they all copy film stars at the bar. There was something about her that attracted me from the very start, and so every evening off I'd go over to see her. I even wrote Mom that I had a nice girl, and all that sort of thing. You know.

This trip I had made up my mind finally and was thinking over how to tell her. No use holding things up, that's the way I felt. But things were held up, after all. Some guy was out there on the highway, I honked the horn, but instead of moving away he jumped about and almost landed under the car. So I slammed down the brakes and got out:

"Hey, what's wrong, can't you see a car when it's right in front of you?"

He looked at me, then at the sky and slowly got to his feet, beating the dust out of his old jeans.

"There's something a lot worse than cars that's frightening people." He came over to me and asked. "Going into town?"

I nodded and he got in, just as wild-looking as before. Terribly scared is what I figured, with droplets of sweat all over his forehead, with dark damp circles around the armpits of his shirt.

"How come you're out training so early?" I asked.

"Much worse," he repeated putting his hand into his pocket. Along with his handkerchief, a 1952 Barky Jones fell out onto the seat.

I whistled in surprise: "What's this a pursuit?"

I was now sorry that I had got mixed up with him. I don't like highway encounters of that nature.

"Crazy," he said without anger. "It's not mine, the boss's: I'm just watching the herd at Vinicio's ranch."

"Cowboy?"

"No," he replied screwing up his face and wiping the sweat off his forehead. "I can't even ride a horse. But I need money for college."

I smiled to myself: 'escaping gangster turns into vacation-working student'.

"My name's Mitchell Casey," he said.

I told him my name, hoping not without vanity that because it had been in the papers since meeting the dragons at MacMurdo he might recognize it, but I was mistaken. He hadn't been reading the papers or listening to the radio, had never heard of me, nor of the rose clouds: "Maybe this is a war or men from Mars have landed, it's about the same, I don't know."

"There's no war yet," I said. "It might be Martians all right, though."

I told him briefly about the rose clouds. But I never expected my story to produce the reaction that it did. He grabbed for the door as if he wanted to jump out on the spot, but then he opened his mouth and with trembling lips asked:

"From the sky?"

I nodded.

"Long rose-coloured cucumbers. Like diving airplanes?"

That surprised me. He seemed to know all about them, though he said he didn't read the papers.

"I just saw some," he said, and again wiped his forehead, this time from cold sweat most likely. The meeting with our acquaintances from the Antarctic seemed to have knocked him out completely.

"So what?" I asked. "They fly and they dive, do a good job. And they're like cucumbers. But no harm done. Just a fog, that's all. You're a bit of a coward, aren't you?"

"Anyone would have got scared in my place," he said still all keyed up. "I nearly went crazy when they doubled my herd."

And, then looking around, as if afraid someone might be listening, he added softly, "And me too."

I realized then, Yuri, that Mitchell had gone through the same thing that you and I had. These damn clouds got interested in the herd, dived down, doubled it and this plucky cowboy tried to drive them off. Then something totally unexplainable occurred. One of the rose cucumbers approached him, hovered over his head and ordered him to retreat. Not in words, naturally, but like a hypnotizer—to go back and get on the horse. Mitchell told me that he could not do anything other than as he was told. Without offering any resistance, he went back to the horse and got into the saddle. What I think is that they wanted someone on horseback because they already had quite a collection of people on foot. The rest was routine: the red fog, the complete immobility—you can't move a hand or a foot and it is as if you were being examined straight through. A very familiar pattern. When the fog dispersed and the boy came to he couldn't believe

his eyes—the herd had doubled, and to the side, on a horse, was another Mitchell. The horse was the same, and he was the same, as if in a mirror.

That's when he lost his nerve; and I remember well the first time that happened to me too. Well, it was the same thing, he ran, he just ran to get away from it. Then he stopped. The cattle weren't his, he would be responsible. He thought a bit, and then returned. What he found was what had been there before the coming of the rose clouds. No extra cattle, no duplicate horse. So he figured he must have been seeing things, or he was out of his mind. He drove the cattle into the paddock, and left for town to see the boss.

All of this is by way of introduction, you understand. I had hardly quieted down the boy when I myself got the jitters: there they were flying at house-top level, single file as if it were along a road. Just like Disney characters, like our radioman at MacMurdo had suggested, not like cucumbers. Then Mitchell saw them. Dead silence. He was breathing heavily.

That's it again, I thought, recalling how those dirigibles had plunged into combat in our first aerial fight. But this time they did not even descend, they simply hurtled by at sonic speed like rose-coloured flashes of lightning in a lilac sky.

"They're headed for town," Mitchell whispered from behind.

I didn't say anything.

"I wonder why they didn't pay any attention to us."

"Not interested. Two in a car, any number about like us. And I'm tagged as it is."

He didn't get me.

"We've already met," I explained. "And they remember."

"I don't like this at all," he said and fell silent.

And so we drove on in silence until the town came into sight. We were about a mile away but for some reason I didn't recognize it. It seemed so strange in the lilac haze, like a mirage over distant shifting yellow sands.

"What the hell!" I exclaimed in surprise. "Maybe my speedometer's on the blink. It should be a good dozen miles yet to town, but there it is."

"Look up over there!" Mitchell shouted.

Right over the mirage of the town hung a string of rose clouds, sort of like jellyfish or perhaps umbrellas, or a cross between them. Maybe that's a mirage too.

"The town's not in the right place," I said. "I don't get it."

"We should have passed old man Johnson's motel by this time," Mitchell put in. "It's only a mile from town."

I recalled the shrivelled up face of the motel owner and his stentorian commanding voice: "The world's gone nuts, Don. I'm already beginning to believe in God." I seemed ready to believe in God too. I was seeing marvelous unfathomable miracles. Johnson, who ordinarily sat on his porch and greeted all cars passing by, had vanished. That in itself was a miracle. Never, in all my travelling to town, had I ever missed old man Johnson waving us into town. A bigger enigma yet was the disappearance of his motel, for we couldn't have passed it. There weren't even any signs of a structure along the road.

On the other hand, the town was coming into full sight. Sand City in a lilac haze ceased to be a mirage.

"A town like any other," said Mitchell, "but there's something different here. Maybe we're on another route."

But we were coming in by the usual route. The same red-brick houses, the same sign boards with big letters reading: 'Juiciest Beef Steak in Sand City', the same gas station. Even Fritch in a white jacket was standing as usual near the lightning-split oak tree with his broad smile "What can I do for you, sir? Oil? Gas?"

Chapter XIV

WEREWOLF CITY

I stopped the car with a screech of brakes so familiar to gas station attendants round this place.

"Howdy, Fritch. What's doing in town?"

It looked to me like Fritch didn't recognize me. He approached us but kind of unwillingly, no eagerness, like a person coming into a brightly lit room from the dark. Still more striking were his eyes: fixed, as if dead, they looked through us, not at us. He stopped before reaching the car.

"Good morning, sir," he said indifferently in a dull hollow voice.

He didn't use my name.

"What's happening to the city!?" I yelled.
"What's it got, wings?"

"Don't know, sir," the voice was Fritch's but

in a totally indifferent monotone. "What would you like, sir?"

No, this wasn't Fritch at all.

"Where's old man Johnson's motel gone to?" I asked impatiently.

He replied without a smile:

"Old man Johnson's motel? Don't know, sir." He took a step closer and, now with a smile—but such an artificial smile it was that I was horrified... Then, "What can I do for you, some oil, or gas?"

"Okay," I said. "We'll figure this out yet. Let's go, Mitchell." As I left the gas station, I turned around. Fritch was still standing there on the roadside, watching us go, his eyes the cold, fixed eyes of a corpse.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Mitchell. "Taken a bit too much this morning?"

But I knew that Fritch did not drink, anyway nothing more than Pepsi Cola. This wasn't liquor, it was something inhuman.

"A puppet," I muttered, "a wound-up puppet. 'Don't know, sir. What can I do for you, sir?'"

You know I'm no coward, Yuri, but honestly I cringed from a premonition of imminent danger. Too many unaccountable accidents, and worse than down there in Antarctica. I even wanted to turn around and go back, but there's no other route to town. And there was no point in going back to the base.

"You know where to find the boss?" I asked Mitchell.

"In the club most likely."

"Okay, we'll begin with the club," I sighed.

"Since the town's right here, there's no use stopping now."

I turned down Eldorado Street racing the car past neat rows of cottages, all yellow like newborn chicks. There were no pedestrians, nobody walked—this was an upper-crust neighbourhood, quiet; the big shots had already left for their offices, and their wives were still stretching in bed or having late breakfasts in their electrified kitchenettes. Mitchell's boss was taking a snack in the club, which was at the cross-roads of Main Street and State. By this time I was fairly ashamed of my unrealized fears—the blue sky, no rose clouds over head, the heated-up asphalt, the hot wind sweeping bits of newspaper which might even be carrying the rose-cloud sensation and stating that it was the concoction of New York nuts. Sand City was fully protected from any cosmic intruder. Everything returned us to the reality of quiet town, the way it should be on a sultry summer morning like today.

At least that is the way it seemed to me, because it was all an illusion, Yuri. There was no morning in the town and it wasn't slumbering or sleeping. We could see that at once when we turned down State Street.

"Isn't it too early for the club?" I asked Mitchell still thinking by inertia about the sleeping city.

He laughed—there was a crowd at the intersection that had stopped all traffic. This was no morning crowd and this was no waking-up city. The sun shone but the electric street lights were just as bright, as if it were still last night. Neon lights were still flashing on and off in the show-

windows and on signs. In movie houses, cowboys were shooting, James Bond was fearlessly on the job seeking out victims to eliminate. Billiard balls were racing noiselessly over green tables, and the jazz band over at the "Selena" Restaurant was banging away as loud as a passing train. And on the sidewalks, pedestrians were walking lazily along, not hurrying to work, because work had long since ceased, the city was alive with evening life, not morning duties. As if the people together with the electric lighting were out to fool time and nature.

"Why the lights? Isn't the sun enough?" Mitchell said in bewilderment.

I pulled up at the curb near the tobacco store. Tossing some change on the counter I carefully asked the pretty sales girl:

"What's it a holiday today?"

"What holiday?" she asked by way of reply, handing me the cigarettes. "An ordinary evening of a usual day?"

The immobile blue eyes looked through me like the dead eyes of Fritch.

"Evening?" I repeated. "Take a look at the sky. What's the sun doing there if it's evening?"

"Don't know." Her voice was calm and indifferent. "It's evening now and I don't know anything."

I slowly left the shop. Mitchell was waiting in the car. He had heard the whole conversation and was probably thinking the same thoughts as I was: who's crazy, we or everyone in town? Maybe it really was evening and Mitchell and I were seeing things. I took another close look at the street. It was part of Route 66 that passed

through to New Mexico. The cars were passing two lanes abreast in both directions. Ordinary United States cars on an ordinary American highway. All of them had their headlights on.

On an impulse, I grabbed the first passer-by.

"Hey, take your hands off me," he exploded.

He was a little, thick-set but nimble man in a crazy-like bicycle cap. His eyes were not empty and indifferent, but alive and angry. They looked at me with revulsion. I turned around and looked at Mitchell who mimicked that the fat guy must be touched in the head. And the anger of the roly-poly stranger switched to a different direction.

"You say I'm crazy, do you!" he screamed and lunged for Mitchell. "You're the ones that are mad, the whole town's gone nuts. Electricity in the morning, and the only answer I get to all questions is 'I don't know'. All right, what is it: morning or night?"

"Morning, of course," said Mitchell, "but something's wrong here in town this morning, I just don't understand."

The metamorphosis of the fat man was amazing. He no longer screamed or yelled, only quietly smiled stroking Mitchell's sweaty hand. Even his eyes moistened.

● "Thank heavens, one normal man in this nut house of a town," he said finally still holding on to Mitchell's hand.

"Two," I said extending my own hand. "You're the third. Let's exchange impressions. We might be able to figure out this number."

We stopped on the edge of the curb separated

from the highway by a colourful string of parked cars, nobody inside.

"Gentlemen, explain this to me," he began, "these tricks with cars. They ride along, disappear, vanish, into nowhere."

To put it honestly, I didn't get what he was driving at. What was this "into nowhere". He explained. Only he needed a smoke to calm down. "I don't usually smoke, but you know it does have a calming effect."

"My name's ~~Lesley Baker~~, travelling salesman. Women's apparel, cosmetics. Always on the go, here one day, gone the next. I arrived on the route from New Mexico, turned onto Route 66. I was crawling along awfully slow, like a snail. There was this big green van right in front, couldn't pass it for the life of me. You know how it is, going slow. A toothache's worse. Then this sign 'You are now entering the quietest city in the United States'. Quietest, my eye, the craziest, that's more like it. At the city limits, where the highway widens out—there are no sidewalks—I tried again to get out ahead of this big van. I just stepped on the gas, and it vanished, went up into nothing. I was flabbergasted. So I put on the brakes, pulled over to the side and looked here and there, no van. Evaporated like sugar in a cup of coffee. I even ran into a barbed-wire fence, lucky I was going slow."

"Why a barbed-wire fence along the road?" I asked surprised.

"On the highway? There wasn't any highway. It had gone along with the van. All there was was a red open space, a green island-like something at a distance, and the fence and barbed wire all

about. Somebody's farm, I guess. You don't believe me? Well, I didn't myself. The hell with the van, I figured, but where did the road go to? I must have been off my rocker. I turned around and nearly died then and there—a huge black Lincoln was heading for me right through the wire! It was doing at least a hundred miles an hour. I didn't even have time to jump, I just closed my eyes. This was the end for sure. A minute passed, no end. I opened my eyes, no end, no car, no nothing."

"Maybe it passed by."

"Where? How? On what road?"

"So the road disappeared too?"

● He nodded.

"So," I said, "the cars disappeared before reaching the barbed wire?"

"That's just it. One after the other. I stood there some ten minutes and they kept on disappearing at the edge of the highway. It broke off in red clay at the very edge of the wire. There I stood like Rip Van Winkle, blinking my eyes. To all questions, only one answer: 'Don't know.' Why are the cars driving with headlights on? Don't know. Where are they disappearing to? Don't know. Maybe going to hell? Don't know. Where's the highway? The eyes are glassy like those of the dead."

It was already clear to me what kind of city this was. All I wanted was one more test: to take a look with my own eyes. I looked around and raised my hand: one of the cars stopped. The driver had glassy eyes too. But I risked it.

"I'm going to the city limits. Two blocks or so, that's all."

"Hop in," he said indifferently.

I got in beside him. The fat guy and Mitchell got in behind, not quite understanding what it was all about. The driver turned his head away, completely apathetic, stepped on the gas, and covered the two blocks in half a minute.

"Look," Baker from behind whispered in agitation.

In front of us, right across the highway cut off by the red clay were four rows of rusty barbed wire. One could only see a small portion of the wire fencework, the rest was hidden behind the houses on the roadside, and so it seemed as if the whole city were fenced in and isolated from the world of living human beings. I already had some idea of this thing from Baker's story, but the reality was still crazier.

"Watch out for the wire," Baker yelled grabbing at the arm of the driver.

"Where?" was the surprised reply and he pushed away Baker's hand. "You're nuts."

He obviously didn't see the wire.

"Put on the brakes," I said, "we're getting out here."

The driver slowed down, but I could already see the radiator beginning to melt in the air. It was as if something invisible were eating the car away inch by inch. The windshield had gone, then the instrument panel, the driving wheel, the hands of the driver. This was ghastly—so terrifying that I instinctively closed my eyes. Then a sharp blow knocked me to the ground. I pitched into the dust and rolled along on the asphalt roadway, which means I was flung out at the very edge of the highway. But how did I fly

out? The door of the car was shut, the car hadn't overturned or anything. I raised my head and in front I saw the body of an unfamiliar gray car. Alongside in the dust lay unconscious our friend the salesman.

"Are you alive?" asked Mitchell bending down to him. He had a black eye. "I was knocked right against Baker's bus." He nodded towards the gray car stuck in the wire roadblock.

"Where's ours?"

He shrugged his shoulders. For a minute or two we stood silent at the edge of the cut-off highway watching one and the same miracle that had just left us without a car. The fat travelling salesman had also got to his feet and had joined our spectacle. It was repeated every three seconds when—at full speed—a car crossed the edge of the highway. Fords and Pontiacs and Buicks—all kinds drove in and vanished without a trace, like soap bubbles. Some of the cars were heading right into us as we stood there, but we did not move because they simply evaporated two feet in front of us. The entire process of mysterious and inexplicable vanishings was clearly visible right here in the hot sunshine. True enough, they did not vanish suddenly but gradually, by diving, as it were, into some kind of a hole in space and disappearing there, beginning with the front bumper and winding up with the back license plate. The whole city seemed to be fenced round with transparent glass, beyond which there was no highway, no cars, no city at all.

Probably one and the same thought rankled all three of us: What was there to do? Return to

town? But what kind of marvels might not be awaiting us there, some kind of wierd circus perhaps? What kind of people would there be, who would be able to speak a normal human word? So far we hadn't met up with a single normal person except the travelling salesman. I suspected the doings of the rose clouds, but people hereabouts were not like the duplicates created at the South Pole. Those were, or seemed to be, human beings, while these resembled resurrected dead who knew nothing but the desire to go somewhere, to drive cars, knock billiard balls about and drink whiskey. I recalled Thompson's version and now for the first time got real scared. Had they indeed been able to replace the entire population of the city? Could it be. . . . No, there was still one more test to make. Only one.

"Let's get back to town, boys," I said to my companions. "We've got to rinse out heads in a big way or else the nut house is the only place for us. Judging by the cigarettes, the whiskey here is real."

But I was thinking about Mary.

Chapter XV

PURSUIT

At about noon we arrived at the bar where Mary worked. The show window and the neon signs were ablaze with light. The owners were not trying to save on electricity even at high noon. My white duck jumper was wet through and through with sweat, but it was cool and

empty in the bar. The high stools were vacant; there were only a few couples near the window whispering and a half-drunk old man in the corner nursing his bottle of brandy and orange juice.

Mary did not hear us enter. She was standing with her back to us at the open counter and was putting bottles on the shelves. We climbed onto three stools and exchanged expressive glances without a word. Mitchell was just about to call Mary, but I stopped him and signalled for silence. I was going to do the test myself.

This was indeed the hardest experiment of all in this insane city.

"Mary," I called hardly audibly.

She swung around as if frightened by the sound of my voice. Her squinting short-sighted eyes without glasses and the bright light blinding her from the ceiling might have explained her well-mannered indifference towards us. She did not recognize me.

But she wore her hair the way I liked it—rather plain without any movie-star effects. And she had on a red dress with short sleeves that I always preferred. All this could account for something else as well. She knew about my visit and was expecting me. That was a relief, for a minute I forgot about any doubts and fears.

"Mary," I said louder.

The answer was a coquettish smile, with head tipped to one side, symbolically stressing the trained readiness to serve her customer, but that typified any girl at the bar, not Mary. With the boys she knew, she was different.

"What's the matter, baby?" I asked. "I'm Don!"

"What's the difference, Don or John?" she responded with a playful shrug of the shoulders and a glance with meaning, but she failed to recognize me. "Anything I can do for you?"

"Hey, look at me, will you?" I said rudely.

"What for?" came her surprised respond, but she looked.

I saw two huge bulging eyes—not hers—blue and narrow like the girls in pictures by Salvador Dali, and always lively, kind or angry. There were the cold dead eyes of Fritch, the eyes of the girl in the tobacco store, the eyes of the driver that evaporated on the highway with his car—the glassy eyes of a doll. A puppet. Not alive, that was it. The test was a failure. There weren't any live people in that city. Then the instantaneous decision to run. Anywhere, just to get out of it all before it was too late, before all this damned horror invaded us completely.

"Follow me!" I shouted, jumping off the stool.

The fat man was disappointed expecting the promised drink, but Mitchell got the message. A bright kid. When we were out in the street he said, "How will I find the boss now?"

"You won't find your boss anywhere here," I said. "There aren't any people here, just make believe, half-people. Let's beat it."

The fat man couldn't get anything through his head, but obediently followed behind from fear; he obviously didn't relish staying alone in this weird city. I'm afraid that even Mitchell wasn't fully aware of what was going on, but at least he didn't argue. He had seen enough bizarre

events along the road today, it was enough for him!

"If we have to clear out, then we will," he remarked philosophically. "Do you remember where we left the car?"

I looked around, my "corvette" wasn't on the corner. I must have left it farther down the street. In its place near the curb, about two or three yards from us was a black police car, headlights ablaze. There were a couple of policemen in uniform inside, and two more—one with a broken nose, must've been a former boxer—stood next to the open door. On the other side of the street, near a sign that read "Commercial Bank" were two more. They were all following us with intent but hardly alive, penetrating eyes. I didn't like that at all.

The sergeant said something to those in the car. The concentrated look on his face was ominous. They were definitely waiting for someone. Maybe us, shot through my mind. Anything could happen in this upsidedown city.

"Hurry up, Mitch," I said looking around, "we seem to be in for it."

"Over that way," he replied and ran, weaving through the cars parked at the curb.

I slipped around a truck that nearly hit me and got to the other side of the street some distance away from the suspicious black wagon. Just in time, too. The sergeant stepped out onto the pavement and raised his hand.

"Hey, you, stop!"

But I had already swung into the side street, a dark canyon-like alley between houses without signs or windows. The fat guy dashed with sur-

prizing agility and caught up with me, grabbed my hand:

"Look what they're doing!"

I turned around. The policemen had strung out and were crossing the street on the run. In front was the sergeant breathing heavily and reaching for his gun. Noticing me turn around, he shouted:

"Stop or I'll shoot!"

I didn't want to see how his gun worked, particularly here when I had figured out the origin of this town and its population. I was lucky—I heard the whistle of bullets after I had jumped behind an empty car. The closely parked chain of cars made it easier for us to maneuver. With amazing nimbleness spurred on by fear, Baker and Mitchell dived, crouching, and raced across the street.

I knew this side-street. Somewhere along here there should be two houses with an arched gateway between them. There you could get through to the next street and catch a passing car or find one: maybe our own. We left it somewhere nearby on the corner of just such a narrow side-street. Or we might hide in the repair shop. A week before when Mary and I were walking past, the shop was empty and there was a "To Let" sign up. I remembered the shop when we went under the arched gateway. The policemen were stuck some distance behind.

"This way!" I shouted to my companions and pulled on the door.

The padlock and sign were still hanging there and my jerk didn't open the door. Then I rammed it with my shoulder, it creaked but held.

Then Mitchell tried with his whole body. The door groaned and collapsed in a jangle of falling metal.

But there wasn't anything behind it, it didn't lead anywhere. We faced a dark opening filled with a thick black jelly-like something. At first we thought it was simply the darkness of an unlighted entrance way out of the sunlight in this narrow alley. I pushed forward into the darkness, but jumped back again: it turned out to be elastic like rubber. Now I could see it perfectly well—a definitely black something, perceptible to the touch, but awfully dense and resilient, blown up like an automobile tire or compressed smoke.

Then Mitchell plunged into it, he jumped into the darkness like a wildcat and rebounded like I had. Actually, it—the something—just threw him back. It was most likely impenetrable even to a cannon ball. I figured—I was convinced of this—that the whole inside of the house was the same: no rooms, no people, darkness pure and simple with the resilience of a net.

"What is it?" Mitchell asked horrified.

He was scared stiff like in the morning on the highway. But there was no more time to analyze impressions. Our pursuers were getting closer. They had probably entered the archway. But between us and the dense springy black substance was a narrow—about a foot wide—space of ordinary darkness, maybe of the same kind but sort of rarefied to the constituency of fog or gas. A London smog or pea soup where you don't see more than a yard away. I put out my hand, it disappeared in it as if cut off. I got up

and pressed against the compressed darkness in the depth of the doorway and heard Baker yell out, "Where are you guys?"

Mitchell's hand found me and he saw at once how to get out. Together we pulled the fat travelling salesman through the opening and tried to vanish into the darkness by pressing as hard as possible so that the treacherous resilient thing beyond did not throw us out again.

The door to the repairshop where we were hiding was round the corner of a brick wall that jutted out at this point. The policemen had already looked down the side street but could not see us, yet even an idiot could have guessed we couldn't have been able to run the length of the street and hide.

"They're some place around here," the sergeant said. The wind carried his words. "Try it along the wall."

Bursts of machine-gun fire followed one after the other. The bullets did not touch us hidden behind the jutting portion of the wall, but they whistled by and crunched into the brick knocking out bits of the wall. The three of us were breathing heavily, tense with nerves at the bursting point. I was afraid the salesman might give up, so I held him by the throat. If he squeaks, I thought, I'll have to press harder. By then shots were ringing out from the other side of the street, the police were firing down entrance ways and into indentations. I know that type and whispered to Mitchell:

"Give me your pistol!"

I wouldn't have done it in a reasonable city with normal policemen even in a similar situa-

tion, but in this backside-to town all means would do. So I didn't tremble when I reached in the dark for Mitchell's plaything. Cautiously, I looked round the jutting wall and slowly raised the gun till I had the big mug of the sergeant in the sight, then I pressed the trigger. There was a sharp report and I could clearly see the head of the policeman jerk from the impact of the bullet. It even seemed to me that I saw a neat round hole at the bridge of the nose. But the sergeant did not fall, he didn't even reel.

"I've got 'em," he cried out enthusiastically. "They're hiding around the corner."

"How'd you miss him?" said Mitchell downheartedly.

I did not answer. I was positive I'd got the policeman square in the forehead. I simply couldn't have missed. I've shot and won prizes. This could only mean that these puppets were not afraid of bullets. I was trembling all over now so I didn't even aim, I just pumped the whole clip into the big-cheeked sergeant. I could almost physically feel the bullets plump into the body.

Nothing happened. He didn't even feel them, didn't jerk or try to escape. Could it be that, inside, he was all that rubber that we were hiding close to now?

I threw down the useless pistol and left the hiding place. Now nothing mattered any more, there could be only one end.

At that moment something happened, not exactly sudden, I wouldn't say. Something had been changing in the situation all along, simply in the heat of the fight we hadn't noticed prop-

erly. The air about was going redder, little by little, then deep crimson. I drove the last clip of bullets into the sergeant without being able to see him properly in his murky surroundings. And when the pistol fell to the ground, I looked at it automatically, but it wasn't there: under my feet was a thick crimson jelly. A fog of the same colour had enveloped everything. Only the figures of the policemen stood dimly at a distance like purple shadows. The fog was thickening all the time, finally it got as dense jam. But it did not hamper our breathing or movements in the least.

I don't know how long this lasted, a minute, half an hour or an hour, but all of a sudden it had rapidly and unnoticeably melted away. When it was over, a totally different picture opened up to us. There were no policemen, no houses, no streets, only the brick-like sun-baked desert and the sky with ordinary clouds scudding along high up. Off in the distance was the hazy dark ribbon of the highway, and in front of us, all entangled in barbed wire, was the upturned car of our fat travelling salesman.

"What was it all about? Was it a dream?" he asked.

His voice was so excited it came out hoarse, he could hardly speak, his tongue wouldn't obey, like people who are regaining the capacity to speak.

"No," and I patted him on the shoulder for encouragement. "I don't want to console you. This was no dream but complete reality. And we are the only participants."

Here I was mistaken. There was yet another

witness who had watched events from the sidelines, so to speak. We found him a bit later. It took us about a quarter of an hour to get to a motel, an ancient structure but with a nice new shiny concrete-glass-aluminum garage. And Johnson, as usual, was sitting on the steps of his porch. He jumped up when he saw us and seemed unnaturally happy.

"Don?" he said not quite convinced. "Where you from?"

"From the inside of hell," I said. "From the branch office, it has here on the earth."

"You been in this crazy house?" He looked at us with horror in his eyes.

"Yes, I was there all right," I assured him. "I'll give the whole story, only give me a drink of something, that is, if you yourself are no mirage."

No, he wasn't. The iced whiskey wasn't either. It was a great relief to sit down and hear what it was like from the outside of this city.

Johnson saw it all very suddenly. He was sitting, dozing and all at once he came to, looked around and froze stiff: to the left where there had never been anything, except dried up clay, was a twin city. To the right was Sand City and to the left was Sand City. "I thought this was the end, the end of the world! I was not drunk, could see straight, no doubling up. I went into the house, then came back again, but the same thing: me in the middle of two twin cities, was it a mirage? After all, it might be, this is a desert, you know. Well, the twin city was here all right, never evaporated and didn't melt. And worse, there wasn't a single car on the highway.

Then all of a sudden, it got dark and hazy, a fog or something like a fog, smoke or something, or like a storm cloud grazing the ground, an orange red." As I listened to Johnson's story, I noticed that every witness gave the colours a little differently. The fog was purple, or cherry, or crimson or red. But whatever it was, it lifted finally and then here we were coming along the road.

Later still, Mary had her own story of the fog. She had really been waiting for me, and the dress she had on was just like that of the phantom girl in the fog. She also told us what had happened in the city. I won't relate it, since I'm sending along a couple of newspaper clippings. You'll figure it all out better than I can."

I put down the last page of the letter and waited until Irene had finished reading. We looked at each other and failed to find words. We were probably both thinking the same thing: is it really possible that our everyday earthly life can get so close to a fairy tale?

Chapter XVI

MOSCOW TO PARIS

The clipping Martin sent from the Sand City Tribune read:

"A curious meteorological phenomenon occurred yesterday in our city. At half past seven yesterday evening, when the bars and stores and movie houses all along State Street were lighted up brightly, a strange reddish fog descended on the city. Some say the colour was violet. Actual-

ly, this was no ordinary fog because visibility over considerable distances was not impaired, all things were clearly discernible like on a summer morning of a cloudless day. True, the fog did thicken to the consistency of an ordinary Los Angeles smog. They say it's worse than the London fog. No one knows exactly how long it thickened. Probably not for long because most of the witnesses we questioned claim that the fog remained transparent all the time and that it was only the environment—houses, people and even the air—that took on a deep purple or almost crimson hue, as if one were looking through red glasses. At first, the people stopped, looked at the sky and since there was nothing to be seen, calmly continued on their way. The fog did not affect amusement shows, movies and the like because it wasn't even noticed there. The event persisted for about an hour and then the fog, if you can call it a fog, dispersed and the city became its evening self again.

"Meteorologist James Backley, who comes from Sand City and is visiting here at present, explained that this phenomenon cannot be classed as meteorological. He described it rather as an enormous rarefied cloud of minute particles of an artificial dye dispersed in the air, probably brought in by the wind from some dye works within an area of 100-150 miles radius. Such a highly atomized and nondispersible accumulation of minute dye particles is a rare event indeed, but not exceptional and may be carried by the wind for many miles.

"The editors believe that the rumours started about some kind of rose-coloured clouds are

completely groundless. The rose clouds are to be sought in polar and not subtropical regions of the continent. As for the statement made by Mr. Johnson, the owner of a motel on the federal highway, that he saw two identical cities on either side of his motel, it comes as no surprise to the editors or to people acquainted with Mr. Johnson. The tourist season has not yet started and the motel is empty most of the time. It seems obvious that a drink or two of whiskey produced these two cities that eventful day.

"Quite another explanation of these events comes from our sharpshooter Lammy Cochen, owner of the 'Orion' bar and leader of the 'Wild' Club. He says it's the work of the Reds. 'Look out for the Reds, for they not only colour politics, but even the air we breathe.' Doesn't that link up with New York lawyer Roy Desmond being beaten up as he emerged from a bar in our city? He refused to answer certain questions relating to the coming presidential elections. There might be some connection. The police who immediately came to the site of the disturbance were unable to identify any of the participants."

Admiral Tompson gave an interview to the "Time and People" magazine: 'PLAGUE GRIPS SAND CITY, SAYS ADMIRAL, ROSE CLOUDS TO BLAME.'

"During the past few days, a little southern town on Route 66 has been the focus of attention of the whole country. Papers have already published reports of the red fog that so suddenly enveloped the city and the story of the traveling salesman Lesley Baker about the bizarre events in the twin city. Our reporter interviewed

retired Admiral Tompson, a member of the United States Antarctic expedition and the first eye witness of the rose clouds in action."

"What do you think about the events in Sand City, sir?"

"Well, I believe that it is the deep concern of the ordinary citizen about the future of human society."

"You believe that there are grounds for concern?"

"Yes, I do. The 'clouds' are not confining themselves to the copying of individuals, but they are synthesizing whole strata of society. I will give only the latest cases: the ocean liner 'Alamade' with its crew and passengers in toto, the big store in Buffalo on a particularly busy day, the plastics works in Evansville. It cannot be that all witnesses had the same dream as if they had lived together for years, and then the duplicate factory that vanished. No one can convince me that it was all merely a mirage caused by a temperature gradient in different layers of air. And it is not of the slightest importance that it persisted for only minutes. The important thing is that nobody can convincingly demonstrate which one of the factories disappeared and which remained!"

"When speaking of the events in Sand City at the Apollo Club, you mentioned the plague. Now in what sense was that?"

"Oh, the most direct. The city must be isolated, subjected to systematic tests and unabated observations in the future. The problem is the same: are these real people or are they all duplicates? Unfortunately, neither the authorities nor

society at large are paying anywhere near the necessary attention to this problem."

"You couldn't be exaggerating a bit, could you, sir?" our reporter objected. "Do you really accuse the country of indifference to the cosmic visitors?"

The Admiral replied with irony:

"Well, not if one speaks of rose-cloud skirts and horsemen-from-nowhere hairdos. Or, say, the congress of spiritualists that declared the clouds to be the spirits of the dead returning to the world with a gift from almighty God. That's not indifference! Or take the twelve-hour filibustering speeches of senators about the 'horsemen' in Congress so as to kill a bill on taxing big incomes. Or stock brokers using the 'clouds' to play down stocks. Or preachers proclaiming the end of the world. Or perhaps film producers putting out things like 'Bob Merrile Vanquishes Horsemen From Nowhere'. All of that is nothing more than a broken sewage main. I have something quite different in mind. . . ."

"War?"

"With whom? The 'clouds'? I'm not an idiot to think that mankind is sufficiently armed to combat a civilization that is capable of creating all manner of atomic structures. I spoke of chasing out the 'clouds', more precisely of the necessity to find ways and means of contributing to this aim." The Admiral added: "Powerful as this civilization is, it might have a weak spot, an Achilles heel. Then why shouldn't we seek it? It seems to me that our scientists are not energetic enough in making contacts, and not so much in the sense of reaching an understanding between

us human beings and the strangers, but in the sense of a direct, immediate, so to say, spatial approach to the cosmic visitors in order to study and observe them. Why is it that their terrestrial base has not yet been located? I would send out a number of expeditions, one of the aims being to locate the weak spot that I am sure they have. The problem is one of vulnerability. Then everything would take on quite a different aspect."

In this rather loud and outspoken interview the Admiral did not appear to me to be either a maniac or an eccentric, but simply not a very clever person. Yet I felt that his consistent, fanatical prejudice might, in the future, be still more dangerous than the as yet undeciphered actions of our visitors from space. This was slightly hinted at by the interviewer when he cautiously pointed out that to include Admiral Thompson in the American scientific delegation to the Paris international conference might complicate coordination of its efforts.

I passed on both the clippings together with Martin's letter to Zernov in the plane. We occupied what amounted to a separate compartment because it was isolated by the high backs of seats in front and in back. Osovets and Rogovin were to arrive in Paris in two days, just as the congress got underway. We had left earlier so as to take part in the press conference of eye witnesses and to meet the Americans from MacMurdo who did not share Admiral Thompson's views and who had acquired a certain amount of fresh experience with the cosmic visitors after the Admiral had left. We had just had breakfast after taking off from the Moscow airport at Shere-

metievo. It was cool in the plane and all the little local sounds like rustling newspapers and conversation were drowned out by the subdued roar of the jet engines. This was just the time for a talk about Martin's letter. While Zernov was reading and rereading the pages of the letter I whispered to Irene:

"You remember the letter of course. Try to recall all unclear places and formulate some questions. Zernov is like a professor at the lectern who does not like imprecision, misunderstanding."

"Why? Is there such a thing as precise misunderstanding?"

"Naturally. What I don't understand I doubt. The imprecise kind is when you can't determine the chief unclear point, a stupid question and wide-open know-nothing eyes."

I hid behind the newspaper preferring not to hear the reply. Anyway, I would have to formulate all the obscurities by myself. What is the difference between Martin's werewolves and the memorable doubles? I grouped them mentally: empty eyes, lack of understanding of many questions addressed to them, automatic movements and actions, confused ideas about time, vision unlike human vision; they were not able to see the sun, the blue sky and were not surprised at the electric light on the street in the daytime. They did not appear to have any human memory: Martin's girl did not simply fail to recognize Martin, she did not remember him. The bullets from Martin's pistol penetrated these people without causing any bodily harm. Hence, the inner structure of their bodies differed from human

beings. Apparently, the "clouds" did not copy people in this case but only set up externally similar robots with a restricted programme. Thus, we have the first absurd feature: why was the method of simulation changed and within what limits was it changed?

But the clouds built models of things too, not only humans. The duplicate of our tracked vehicle was real. So were all the things in Martin's city. The drinks could be drunk, the cigarettes smoked and the cars driven in. And the bullets of the police-guns even went through brick walls. The houses had real windows and doors, and real cafés dealt in real coffee and hot dogs, the owner of a real gas station sold real oil and gasoline. At the same time, real automobiles appeared like phantoms on the highway that went through the city. They appeared out of nothing, out of emptiness and disappeared at the other end just as mystically and into the same emptiness or nothing, into the cloud of dust that had just been raised by the passing car itself. Not all the doors in the houses led somewhere. Some of them did not lead anywhere, for beyond was a void—a nonpenetrable and black void like compressed smoke. So there was some other system of model-building surrounding things that restricted it in some way. Let us now formulate the second unclear point: Why another system, for what purposes and in what way restricted?

Another puzzling thing: Zernov had already allowed for a different system of simulation in the building of the duplicate airplane on the way to Moscow from Mirny. Did this coincide with what Martin had described?

"To some extent," replied Zernov, after thinking. "Apparently, the clouds create different models in unlike ways. Remember the crimson fog in the plane when you couldn't see across the aisle? In Sand City it isn't even known exactly whether the fog reached that thickness. The paper writes that the air was transparent and pure but coloured or lighted red. The type of model should be connected with the density of the gas. I think that the people in Martin's phantom city were still less human beings than the passengers of our duplicate plane. Why? Let's try to figure it out. You remember, at Karachi, I told you that the people in our airplane were not modelled to the full extent of their biological complexity but only so far as their specific functions go. The entire complicated psychic life of the human being was disconnected, crossed out because the makers of the model did not need it. But the passengers of our plane were not merely Aeroflot passengers. You wouldn't say that, socially speaking, they were only linked by their specific trip, would you? And there were a lot of other things besides: the year spent together, work, friendly or unfriendly relations with one's neighbours, plans for the future, musings about coming reunions. All these factors expanded and complicated their function as passengers. That is why the creators of the model probably had to refine it and retain some cells of the memory, certain mental processes. I think that life in the duplicate plane was very much like our own."

"Or was repeated like a tape recording," I added.

"Hardly. They build models not patterns. Even in Martin's city, life did not repeat what was occurring in the real Sand City. For example, the police pursuit. But note that people in this model of the city are still farther removed from human beings. Only the function is reproduced: the pedestrian walks, the driver drives a car, the salesman sells or offers goods, and buyers buy or refuse. That is all. Yet they are not puppets. They can think, reason, and act, but only within the limits of the function. Tell the waitress in a cafeteria of the modelled city that you don't like the hot dogs. She will straightway say that canned hot dogs do not spoil, that the can was opened hardly fifteen minutes ago, but that if you would like to have her give you a beefsteak instead, well done or with blood, as you like, she'll see to it. She can flirt, wisecrack if she's smart, since that too comes within her professional function. That is why she did not recall Martin: he was not associated with her work."

"But why did the policemen remember him?" Irene asked. "He didn't rob a bank, or pick any pockets or get drunk and fight on the street. Where is the connection with the function?"

"You remember the clipping from the newspaper? During the fog a New York lawyer was beaten up. The police were late and, unfortunately, did not find the culprits. You noticed the 'unfortunately', didn't you? The police of course knew who was to blame but did not plan to find them. But why not find somebody in place of them? Some kind of drunkards or bums? That was the purpose of the police at that moment.

In the real Sand City they did not find anyone. In the modelled city, they came upon Martin and his friends.

"I would have liked to be in his place," I said with envy.

"And get a bullet through your head? The bullets were real."

"And Martin's were too. Maybe he did miss after all?"

"I don't think so," said Zernov, "it is simply that wounds dangerous to human beings are not dangerous when it comes to these bio-golems. Their bodies were hardly very much like the human organism."

"And the eyes? They saw Martin."

"Like a crossword puzzle," Irene laughed. "The words fit, but they're not the words. Certain things dovetail, but a lot doesn't."

"Certainly a crossword puzzle," Zernov added smiling. "What else could it be? You can't get hold of the policeman and put him on the operating table to find out what makes him tick. Of course, then we would find out whether he has the same innards as we. What do we have to resolve the problem with? A slide rule? A microscope? X-rays? It's a joke. We haven't got anything so far, except our logic. And words. Incidentally, the eyes are not the same," he said, referring to my remark. "They saw Martin but they didn't see the sun. They are not our eyes. Because they were programmed to exist only within the limits of a certain modelled hour. Time itself was simulated. And the cars on the highway were modelled in motion within the limits of the same interval of time and the same

region of space. That is how it came about that they entered the twin city from nowhere and vanished into no one knows where. A real puzzle," he smiled.

"Camouflage," I added. "Something like our houses. The outside wall is a real wall and the inside empty, a void, a black nothingness. I'd like to see it through," I said, sighing. "We're supposed to be eye-witnesses, but what have we seen? Not much."

"We'll see some more," put in Zernov mysteriously, "you and I and Martin too are labelled. They'll show us something new yet, perhaps accidentally but maybe purposely. I'm afraid they will."

"You're afraid?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, I'm afraid," Zernov said and fell silent. The plane had cut through the clouds and was descending towards the distant city shrouded in haze with the familiar, from childhood, silhouette of the delicate lacework of the Eiffel Tower. From a distance it looked like an obelisk made of the finest nylon thread.

Part three

JULIET

AND SPECTRES

Chapter XVII

PRESS CONFERENCE AT THE HOTEL "HOMOND"

In connection with the coming congress, Paris was flooded with tourists. Our delegation stayed at the Homond Hotel, a small first-class establishment that was proud of being old-fashioned. The wooden staircases creaked, the heavy draperies were dust covered and elegant ancient chandeliers reminded one of Balzac's day. Candles were alight on the tables, windowsills, at hearth places—not as a tribute to fashion, but as stubborn competitors of electricity, which was something they had to put up with, nothing more. The Americans did not like that arrangement, but we did not seem to feel it. Perhaps because we hardly stayed inside for more than a few minutes. Irene and I spent the two hours

before the press conference taking our first sights of the city. I gaped at every architectural wonder while she condescendingly explained when and for whom it was built.

"How come you know Paris so well?" I asked in surprise.

"This is my third visit, and then I was born in Paris. My baby carriage travelled these very streets. I'll tell you about it some day," she said mysteriously and laughed out loud. "Even the doorman at the hotel greeted me like an old acquaintance."

"When?"

"When you paid off the taxicab. Zernov and I went in to the lobby and the doorman—an old bald-headed lord, you might say—looked us over with professional indifference, and then suddenly opened his eyes wide, stepped back and looked at me intently. 'What's the trouble?' I asked in surprise. But there he stood looking at me, silent. So Zernov asked: 'You probably recognize mademoiselle?' 'No, no,' he said collecting his wits, 'mademoiselle is simply very much like one of our clients.' But he seemed to recognize me, though I've never stayed at that hotel. Strange."

When we returned to the hotel, the doorman did not even look at Irene, but he smiled and said that we were expected. "Go straight to the rostrum".

The conference was indeed just about to begin in the restaurant hall of the hotel. The Americans had already arrived and took up the greater part of the concert stage. Television operators were racing about with their black boxes. Cor-

respondents and newsmen with cameras, notebooks and tape recorders were set up at desks. Waiters were offering bottles with multicoloured labels. We had a table on the stage too, and it had already been well supplied with all manner of drinks by the Americans. Irene remained in the hall; no translation was needed since all, or nearly all, present spoke both French and English. True, my French was not much. I understood fairly well, but couldn't speak very well, but I figured Zernov's presence would relieve me of most of the conversation. I was wrong on that score, though. The newsmen were out to squeeze every ounce of us "witnesses of the phenomenon". And what is more, I was the author of the film that was making a great impression on Parisian audiences for the second week now.

The conference was chaired by MacEdou, ~~an astronomer~~ from MacMurdo. He was already used to the reporters wisecracks about MacEdou from MacMurdo and "much ado about MacEdou." But he was hard to embarrass. He steered our ship in the conference storm with the skill of an experienced helmsman. Even his voice was that of a captain—loud, imperative especially when the questions got too insistent.

It was not by accident that I referred to the storm. Three hours previously, journalists met in another Parisian hotel with another "witness of the phenomenon" and a delegate to the congress, Admiral Thompson. He refused to take part in our press conference for reasons which he preferred to tell newsmen in a private talk. The import of the reasons and the gist of his pronouncements became clear after the first queries were posed.

The delegates specifically questioned gave their answers, all other queries were handled by MacEdou. I didn't remember everything, but what I did went like a tape-recording.

"Do you have any information about the press conference of Admiral Tompson?"

That was the first tennis ball thrown into the hall and it was tossed back by the chairman as follows:

"I'm sorry to say I know nothing, but honestly speaking, I am not very worried."

"But that's a sensational statement the Admiral made."

"Very possible."

"He demands preventive measures against the rose clouds."

"You print that in your papers. I would like questions."

"What will you say if some of the UN delegates demand punitive measures against the newcomers?"

"I am not the minister for war, I can't say anything about such demands."

"But if you were the minister what would you say?"

"Haven't been thinking along those lines for a career."

Laughter and applause was the reply of the hall. MacEdou made a wry face, he didn't like theatrical effects. Not even smiling he took his seat without a word, since the man who had asked the question gave up.

But he was quickly followed by a second one. He did not risk a collision with the eloquence of MacEdou and picked another victim.

"I would like to ask Professor Zernov a question. Do you agree that the actions of the rose clouds might endanger humanity?"

"Of course not," Zernov responded at once. "So far the clouds have not done any harm at all to human beings. Reduction of the terrestrial ice mass will only improve the climate. No damage has been inflicted either on nature or on the work of man."

"Do you insist on that view?"

"Absolutely. The only harm done was to a stool that disappeared in Mirny together with my duplicate, and an automobile that Martin left in the duplicated Sand City."

"What automobile?"

"When?"

"Where's Martin?"

"Martin's coming tomorrow evening." That was MacEdou.

"Was he in Sand City?"

"Ask him yourself."

"How does Professor Zernov know about Martin's car that vanished?"

MacEdou turned round to Zernov and looked questioningly at him. Zernov said:

"I have the news directly from Martin himself. I am not empowered to give the details, however. But I think that one old stool and a second-hand car is not so much damage to humanity."

"A question for Professor Zernov!" came several cries from the hall. "What is your attitude towards the Admiral's statement that doubles represent a fifth column of the invaders and a prelude to a future galactic war?"

"I feel that the Admiral has been reading too

much science fiction of late and he takes it all for reality."

"A question to Anokhin, author of the film. The Admiral believes that you are a double and that your film was taken by a double, whereas the episode of the death of your double in the film was actually the death of Anokhin himself. Have you proof that this is not true?"

I could only shrug my shoulders. How could I prove it? MacEdou answered for me:

"Anokhin doesn't need to offer any proof. In science we have the inviolable principle of 'presumption of an established fact'. Scientists do not need to verify and prove the falsity of some groundless assertion, let the author prove that his assertion is true."

There was some more applause. But this time the lanky MacEdou interrupted the hand-clapping:

"This is not a show, gentlemen."

"What does the chairman think about Mr. Tompson?" someone cried out. "You worked with the Admiral for a whole year in an Antarctic expedition. What is your impression of him as a scientist and as a man?"

"That's the first reasonable question so far," MacEdou grinned. "Unfortunately, I cannot satisfy the curiosity of the questioner. The Admiral and I worked in the same expedition and at the same geographical site, but in different spheres. He is an administrator and I am an astronomer. We hardly ever came into contact. He never displayed the least interest in my astronomical observations and I do not care a bit for his administrative abilities. I'm pretty sure he himself

entific progress. And its momentum at present already allows us to predict, roughly of course, that in the middle or towards the end of next century it will be possible to reproduce objects by means of waves and fields. What waves and what fields is a matter for the level of future knowledge. But I am personally convinced that in that corner of the cosmos, whence these beings came, science and life have already reached that level."

"What kind of life is it?" asked a woman's voice, or so it seemed to me, with a hysterical ring to it and obvious horror. "How can we converse with it if it is a liquid, what sort of contact is possible if it is a gas?"

"Here, drink some water," MacEdou calmly took over. "I don't see you, but it seems to me that you are overexcited."

"I am simply beginning to believe Mr. Tompson."

"I congratulate Mr. Tompson on another convert. As to thinking structures consisting of a liquid or colloid, I can say that ~~we exist in a semi-~~liquid state. The chemistry of our life is the chemistry of carbon and aqueous solutions."

"And the chemistry of their life?"

"What is the solvent? Ours is water, and theirs?"

"Maybe its ~~fluorine~~ life?"

The answer came from an American on the extreme right.

"Everything that I am going to say is hypothetical. Fluorine life? Don't know. In that case the solvent might be hydrogen fluoride or fluorine oxide. Then it's a cold planet. For fluorine

creatures a temperature of minus one hundred degrees is pleasantly cool. To put it mildly, in that coolish medium, ammonium life is possible too. It is even more realistic since ammonia occurs in the atmospheres of many of the major planets, whereas liquid ammonia exists at a temperature of thirty-five degrees below zero. Almost terrestrial conditions, you might say. And if one gives thought to the adaptability of the guests to our earthly conditions, the ammonia hypothesis will appear to be the most probable. But if one presumes that the strangers themselves create the necessary conditions for their life, any other hypothesis, even the most unlikely, is possible."

"A question for the chairman as a mathematician and astronomer. What was the Russian mathematician Kolmogorov referring to when he said that upon an encounter with extraterrestrial life we might even be unable to recognize it? Isn't this a case?"

MacEdou replied without a smile.

"He undoubtedly had in mind questions that are sometimes asked at press conferences."

There was again laughter in the hall and again the reporters, sidestepping MacEdou, attacked from the flanks. The next victim was the physicist Vierre, who had just taken a drink of whiskey and soda.

"Mr. Vierre, you are a specialist in elementary particle physics, aren't you?"

"Let's say yes."

"Well, if the clouds are material, that means they consist of familiar elementary particles, isn't that true?"

"I don't know, it might be otherwise."

"But most of the world we know consists of nucleons, electrons, and quanta of radiation."

"And if we reside in the smaller part of the known world or of a world that we do not know anything about? And suppose that world consists of totally unknown particles that have no counterparts in our physics?"

The questioner was floored by the sudden supposition of Vierre. At this point somebody else remembered me.

"Couldn't the cameraman Anokhin say what he thinks of the hit song of his film in Paris?"

"I don't know it," I said, "and what is more I haven't even seen my film in Paris."

"But it's been shown all over the world. In the Pleyaut Hall I've Montan sings it. In the United States, Pete Seeger. In London, the Beatles have a version. Perhaps you've heard it in Moscow."

I could only shrug.

"But it was written by a Russian. Csavier only made the arrangement for jazz." And then he rather musically sang the familiar words in French: "the horsemen from nowhere. . . ."

"I know," I cried out. "The author is a friend of mine, also a member of the Antarctic expedition, Anatoly Dyachuk."

"Dichuk?" someone asked.

"Not Dichuk, but Dyachuk," I corrected. "Poet, scientist and composer. . . ." I caught Zernov's ironic glance, but I paid no attention: here was Tolya getting famous. I was tossing his name to the newspapers of Europe and America and not fearing to be out of tune, I took it up in Rus-

sian, "The horsemen from nowhere... What is it, a dream or a myth?..."

I was no longer singing alone, the whole hall had picked up the song, some in French, others in English and still others without the words. When everything quieted down, MacEdou delicately rang his bell.

"I think the conference is over, gentlemen," he said.

Chapter XVIII

A NIGHT OF TRANSFORMATIONS

After the press conference we went to our rooms and agreed to meet in an hour for dinner in the same restaurant. I was more tired after that session than in some of the most exhausting Antarctic treks. Only a good sleep could clarify my thoughts and bring me out of the dull apathy that I was in. But sleep, the thing I most needed, wouldn't come no matter what I did. I tossed from side to side on the couch. Finally, I got up, put my head under the cold-water faucet and went to the restaurant to finish off the day so loaded with impressions. But the day was not yet over, and impressions were still to come. One of them passed fleetingly without attracting my attention, though at first it appeared rather strange.

I was going down the staircase behind a man in a brown military uniform. Wasn't it, with square shoulders? The gray whiskers and the crew cut emphasized still more the military in him. Straight as a ramrod, he passed the French doorman without turning his head, and then suddenly stopped, turned and asked:

"Etienne?"

I got the impression that the cold official eyes of the doorman flashed a sign of real fear.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" he said with professional readiness.

I slowed down.

"Remember me?" the whiskered man asked smiling slightly.

"Yes, sir, I do," the Frenchman said in almost a whisper.

"That's good," the other replied, "it's good when people remember you."

And he went down to the restaurant. Purposely stamping hard on the creaky steps, I went down the stairs, and with an innocent face asked the doorman:

"You don't know that gentleman who just entered the restaurant, do you?"

"No, Monsieur," replied the Frenchman looking me over with the same indifference of the official. "A tourist from West Germany. If you want me to, I can find out in the registry."

"No, no," I replied and went on, forgetting almost at once about what had occurred.

"Yuri," said a familiar voice.

I turned around. There was Donald Martin coming towards me in an absurd suede jacket and brightly coloured sports shirt with open collar.

He had been sitting alone at a long table drinking some kind of dark brown beverage. He embraced me and the heavy odour of liquor hit me in the face. But he wasn't drunk, the same old Martin, big bear-like and decisive. This meeting somehow brought me back to the icy wastes of the Antarctic, to the mystery of the rose

clouds and the secret hope, warmed by Zernov's words, that "you and I and Martin are labelled. They'll show us something new yet. I'm afraid they will." Personally, I wasn't afraid. I was waiting.

We reminisced for only a short time before dinner was served. Zernov and Irene appeared. Our end of the table livened up right away. We became so noisy that a young lady and a little girl in glasses got up and went to the far end of the table. The little girl put a thick book in a colourful binding on the table; opposite them a kind looking provincial curé took a seat. He looked at the girl and said. "What a little girl and already wearing glasses!"

"She reads too much," her mother complained.

"And what's that you're reading?" asked the curé.

"Fairy tales," the girl answered.

"Which one do you like best?"

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin."

The curé was indignant: "You shouldn't let a child that age read stories like that."

"What if she has a vivid imagination?"

"She'll have nightmares?"

"Oh, that's nothing," said the lady indifferently. "She'll read and forget it."

Irene distracted me from the curé and the girl.

"Let's change places," she suggested. "I'd rather that guy over there looked at my back."

I turned around and saw the man with the whiskers, the acquaintance—and an unpleasant one it must have been—with whom the doorman decided not to reveal. The whiskers were looking intently at Irene, too much so in fact.

"You have the luck," I grinned. "Another old acquaintance of yours?"

"The same as the lord in the office. Never seen him before."

At this point a journalist from Brussels took a seat near us. I had seen him at the press conference. He had come here a week ago and knew practically everyone.

"Who's that gentleman over there?" I asked him nodding in the direction of the whiskers.

"Lange," said the Belgian screwing up a face. "Herman Lange from West Germany. I think he has a law firm in Düsseldorf. An unpleasant character. And next to him, not at the table d'hôte, at the next table, do you see the man with jerking face and hands? The famous Italian Carresi, film producer and the husband of Violetta Cecci. She's not here right now, she's finishing a film in Palermo. They say he got a smashing script for her in a new film. Variations on historical themes, cloak and dagger stuff. Incidentally, the man opposite him with the black eye-bank, he's a well-known figure too, in the same line: Gaston Mongeousseau, the first swordsman of France...."

He continued to name celebrities around the hall, giving details that we immediately forgot. It was only when the first dish was served that he came to a halt. Then, no one knows why, everybody stopped talking. A strange silence gripped the hall, one could hear only the clinking of knives and forks on dishes. I looked at Irene. She too was eating in silence, rather lazily, with half-open eyes.

"What's the matter?" I asked her.

"Want to sleep," she said, hiding a yawn, "and my head aches. I'm not going to wait for the dessert."

She got up and left. Others followed. Zernov, after a few minutes of silence, said that he too would probably leave to look over the materials of his speech. Then the Belgian left. Soon the restaurant was practically empty, only the waiters were still mooning about like sleepy flies.

"What's this desertion about?" I asked one of them.

"An unexplainable desire to sleep, Monsieur. Don't you feel that way yourself? They say the atmospheric pressure has changed sharply. There'll probably be a thunderstorm."

Then he too left, dragging his feet, practically asleep.

"Are you afraid of a thunderstorm?" I asked Martin.

"Not on the ground," he said laughing.

"Let's take a look around to see what Paris is like at night."

"What's happened to the light?" he asked suddenly.

It had grown dim all of a sudden and had taken on a mirky reddish hue.

"I can't make it out."

"The red fog of Sand City. D'you get my letter?"

"You think it's they again? Nonsense."

"They might have taken a dive down here."

"Is it at Paris as such or this hotel in particular?"

"Who knows?" Martin said with a sigh.

"Let's go out," I suggested.

When we passed the office of the doorman, I noticed that it was somehow different from what it had been before. Everything had changed. The draperies weren't the same, the lampshade in place of a chandelier, a mirror that hadn't been there. I told Martin but he was unconcerned.

"Don't remember. You're thinking up things."

I looked at the doorman and was still more surprised. This was a new man. Very much like the other one, but still not the same. Much younger, no baldness and dressed in a striped apron he didn't have on before, as far as I could remember. Maybe his son had taken over.

"Come on, come on," Martin called.

"Where you going, Monsieur?" the doorman stopped us. There was—or it seemed to me—an ominous note in his voice.

"Does it make any difference to you?" I asked in English. Let him show some respect, that's what I thought.

But he did not respond, he only said:

"Curfew, Monsieur. You can't go out. You run a risk."

"What's got into him, mad or what?" I said to Martin.

"The hell with him," Martin replied. "Come on."

And we went out into the street.

But we stopped stock still and reached out for each other so as not to fall. The darkness was complete, no shadows, no light, only an even dense ink-like darkness.

"What's this," Martin said hoarsely. "Paris without light?"

"Don't know what it is."

"Jesus, there's not a light, nothing."

"The power mains must have broken."

"No candles even, nothing!"

"Maybe it'd be better to go back, what do you think?"

"No," said Martin stubbornly, "I'm not giving up so soon, let's see what's up."

"At what?"

Without answering, he went ahead. I followed holding on to his pocket. Then we stopped. A star flashed high up in the black sky. Another flash shot out to the left of us. I tried to catch the light and touched glass. We were standing near a shop show-window. Without separating from Martin, and drawing him along after me, I felt my way forward.

"This wasn't here before," I said stopping.

"What's that?" asked Martin.

"This show-window. And the shop too. Irene and I walked this way. There was an iron fence. It's not here now."

"Wait a minute," Martin was apprehensive. It wasn't the fence or the window that bothered him. He was listening.

In front of us something crashed a couple of times.

"Sounds like thunder," I said.

"More like a burst of submachine-gun fire," Martin objected.

"You sure?"

"You think I don't know the difference between thunder and gunfire?"

"I guess we ought to go back."

"Let's go on for a while. Maybe we'll meet

somebody. Where the hell have all the people of Paris gone to?"

"Listen, that's shooting. Who? Where?"

As if to confirm my words, the gun gave another burst. Then the noise sank into that of an approaching car. Two beams of light bit into the darkness, licked the stone pavement. I shuddered. Why stone pavement? Both streets around our hotel just hours ago were asphalt.

Martin poked me in the dark suddenly and pressed me to the wall. A truck with men in the back raced past us.

"Soldiers," said Martin. "They're in uniform and helmets. With submachine-guns."

"How did you find out?" I was surprised. "I didn't notice anything."

"Training."

"You know what," I thought out loud, "I don't think we're in Paris, and the hotel is not ours, and the street's different too."

"That's what I've been telling you."

"What?"

"The red fog. Remember? They've dived in, that's definite."

At that moment somebody up above us opened a window. We could hear the squeak of the frame and the shaking of a poorly nailed down window pane. There was no light. But from the darkness over our heads, a hoarse squeaky voice—typical of a French radio announcer—a radio was on the windowsill.

"Attention! Attention! You will now hear the report of the commandant of the city. The two British pilots that landed by parachute from a plane shot down are still hiding out in St. Disier.

In one quarter of an hour, the search will begin. Every block will be combed, house by house. All men found in the house with the enemy parachutists will be shot. Only immediate release of the hiding enemies will halt this operation."

Something clicked in the radio and the voice died out.

"Get that?" I asked Martin.

"I guess so, they're looking for some kind of pilots."

"English."

"In Paris?"

"No, in some kind of St. Disier."

"They're going to shoot somebody?"

"All the men in the house where they find the parachutists."

"What for? Is France at war with England?"

"We must be delirious or under hypnosis, or asleep. Try pinching me."

Martin pinched me so hard I yelled out.

"Hey, don't yell, they'll take us for the English pilots."

"Listen, that's right," I said. "You're almost English. And a pilot too. Let's go back, it isn't far from here."

I walked into the darkness and found myself in a brightly lit room. Actually, only part of it was illuminated, like the corner of a film set caught in the beam of a searchlight: the window was blacked out with a drapery, the table was covered with a flowery oilcloth, there was an enormous multicoloured parrot on a perch in a high wire cage, and an old woman cleaning out the cage with a rag.

From behind I heard Martin whisper, "What's all this?"

"Haven't the slightest idea."

Chapter XIX

THIS MAD MAD MAD WORLD

The old woman lifted her head and looked at us. In her yellow parchment-like face, gray curls and prim Castilian shawl there was something artificial, almost unreal, improbable. Nevertheless, she was a person and her gimlet eyes seemed to screw into us with cold unkindness. The parrot too was real and alive and switched round to look at us, his hooked beak opening.

"Excusé-moi, madam," I began in my school-day French, "we got here quite by accident. Your door must have been open."

"There's no door there," said the woman.

Her voice squeaked like the staircase of our hotel.

"How'd we get here then?"

"You're not French," she squeaked at us, without replying.

I shut up, stepped back into the darkness and bumped into a wall.

"There isn't any door, really," said Martin.

The old woman cackled.

"You speak English like Peggy."

"Do you speak English? Do you speak English?" that was the parrot.

I was thoroughly upset. It wasn't exactly fear, but some kind of spasm gripping my throat. Who is mad? We or the city?

"Strange lighting you have here in the room," I said. "One can't see the door. Where is it? We are going to leave, don't worry."

The old woman cackled again.

"You are the ones who are afraid, gentlemen. Why don't you want to speak with Peggy? You can talk to her in English. They are afraid, Etienne, they are afraid that you will give them away."

I looked around: the room had become lighter, it seemed, and broader. Then I saw the other end of the table, at which our Parisian hotel doorman sat, not the bald lord with the rumpled face but his younger counterpart that met Martin and me in the uncannily altered hallway.

"Why should I give them away, mama?" he asked without even looking at us.

"You have got to find the English pilots. You want to give them away. You want to and you can't."

Young Etienne sighed loudly.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I don't know where they are hiding."

"Find out."

"They don't trust me any more, mama."

"The main thing is that Lange should trust you. Give them the goods. These guys speak English too."

"They're from another time. And they're not English. They came to a congress."

"There are never any congresses in St. Disier."

"They're in Paris, mama. In the Hotel 'Homond'. Many years later. I am already old."

"You are thirty years old now, and they are here."

"I know."

"Then give them over to Lange before the operation begins."

I didn't grasp what was happening, but a certain vague conjecture of events broke through to my consciousness. Only there wasn't time to think things out. I already knew that the events and people about us were by no means illusory and that the danger indicated by their words and actions was a real danger indeed.

"What are they talking about?" asked Martin. I explained.

"This is wholesale madness. Who are they giving us over to?"

"The Gestapo, I think."

"You're mad too."

"No," I said as calmly as I could. "Look, we are now in a different time period, in a different town, in another life. I do not know how and for what purpose it has been modelled. Another thing I don't know is how we're going to get out of here."

While we were talking, Etienne and the old woman were silent, switched off, as it were.

"Werewolves!" Martin exploded. "We'll get out, I have experience in things like this."

He went round the back of Etienne who was sitting at the table, grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and shook him up.

"Listen, you son of a Where's the exit? You're not going to play any more tricks with us, you aren't."

"Where's the exit?" repeated the parrot after Martin. "Where are the pilots?"

I shuddered. In a rage Martin threw Etienne to the side like a rag doll. There, to the side, was something like a doorway, it was cloaked in a reddish haze.

Martin jumped through and I followed. Situations cascaded like a moving picture: into the dark, out of the dark. We were in the lobby of the hotel that we had left some time before. Etienne, whom Martin had so ungentlemanly rough-handled a minute ago, was writing something at his desk, and did not look at us or simply didn't see us.

"Remarkable!" sighed Martin.

"How many more miracles," I added.

"This isn't our hotel."

"That's what I told you when we went out into the street."

"Come on, follow me."

"Okay, if you insist."

Martin rushed to the door and stopped: he was blocked by German soldiers with submachine-guns, like in a film about the last war.

"We have to go out, into the street," Martin said pointing to the darkness.

"Verboten!" the German shouted. "Zurück!" and jabbed Martin in the chest with his gun.

Martin stepped back, wiped his sweaty face. He was still boiling with rage.

"Let's sit here for a minute," I said. "Let's talk things over. Lucky they don't shoot at least. And there's no place to run to anyway."

We sat down at the round table covered with a dusty plush table cloth. This was a very old

hotel, probably older even than our Homond in Paris. It had nothing any more to be proud of, either its ancient background or traditions. Only dust, junk, and probably fear hidden in every object.

"What is happening?" asked Martin in a tired voice.

"I told you. This is another period and another life."

"I don't believe it."

"You don't believe that this life is real? And their guns too? Why, they wouldn't think twice about riddling you with bullets."

"Another life," Martin repeated in growing rage. "All their models are taken from originals. So where is this from?"

"I don't know."

Zernov emerged from the darkness that sliced off a part of the lighted lobby. For a second I took him for a double. But then some kind of inner conviction told me that he was real. He was calm, as if nothing had occurred, and did not show any surprise or concern when he saw us. Of course he must have been upset, he was simply holding himself in check. That was the kind of person he was.

"Martin, if I'm not mistaken," he said approaching him and looking around, "you're again in a city of upsidedowns. And we're with you."

"You know what city this is?" I asked.

"Must be Paris, not Moscow."

"It's neither. We're in St. Disier, to the south-east of Paris if I recall my map properly. A provincial town, in occupied territory."

"Occupied by whom? There's no war now."

"You sure?"

"You're not delirious, are you, Anokhin?"

No. Zernov was magnificent in his imperturbability.

"I've already been delirious once, in the Antarctic," I remarked pointedly. "We were delirious together. By the way, what year is it do you think? Not in the Homond Hotel, but here in these damn mysteries?" And so as not to puzzle him further, I added: "When did one hear 'Verboten' spoken in France? Or when did German soldiers hunt for English parachutists?"

Zernov was still puzzled, he was trying to untangle things in his mind.

"I had already noticed the pink fog and the altered surroundings when I went in your direction. But of course I never conjectured anything like that." He turned round and saw German submachine-gun men frozen on the borderline between light and darkness.

"Incidentally, they're alive," I sniggered. "And the guns they have are real. Go up closer and they'll punch you in the belly with them and yell 'Zurück'. Martin's already had that experience."

The familiar curiosity of the scientist sparked in Zernov's eyes.

"What do you think is being modelled this time?"

"Somebody's past. Which doesn't make our plight any better. By the way, where did you come from?"

"From my room. I got interested in the reddish light when I opened the door and found myself here."

"Get ready for the worst," I said as I saw Lange.

Out of the beam of light stepped the lawyer from Düsseldorf, the one I asked the Belgian about. The same Herman Lange with the mustachios and crew cut, definitely him, only a bit taller, more elegant and younger by about a quarter of a century. He had on a black uniform with the swastika, a tight belt round his youthful wasp waist, the high German military cap and brilliantly shined boots. He was definitely handsome, this polished Nibelung from Himmler's elite.

"Etienne," he said softly, "You said there were two of them, I see three."

Etienne jumped up, his face white as that of a powdered clown, and arms straight down at full attention.

"The third one is from another time period, Herr Ob-berhaupt—excuse me, Herr Sturmbahnführer."

Lange made a wry face.

"You can call me Monsieur Lange. I told you you could. Incidentally, I know where he's from just like you do. Memory of the future. But he's here now and that suits me. Congratulations, Etienne. And these two?"

"English pilots, Monsieur Lange."

"That's a lie," I said without getting up. "I'm Russian too, and my comrade here is an American."

"Profession?" asked Lange in English.

"Pilot," Martin responded pulling himself up from habit.

"But not English," I added.

Lange replied with a bit-off laugh.

"What difference does it make, England or America? We're fighting both of them."

For a moment I forgot about the danger that we were in, I wanted so much to put this spectre of the past in his place. I didn't give thought to the matter of whether he would understand me or not. I simply shouted:

"The war has been over for quite some time, Mr. Lange. We're all from another time period and you too. Half an hour ago you and I and the others were dining in the Homond Hotel of Paris, and you had on an ordinary civilian suit, Mr. tourist lawyer, and not that shining theatrical affair."

Lange did not seem offended. On the contrary, he even laughed out loud, and stepped into the crimson haze that was gathering.

"That's the way our nice Etienne recalls me. He idealizes me and himself as well. Actually, things were quite different."

The dark red haze enveloped him completely and he melted out of view. It took hardly half a minute. But from the fog there emerged a different Lange, not so tall, rougher and thickset, in dirty boots and a long dark coat—an exhausted martinet with bloodshot eyes from sleepless nights. Holding his gloves in his hand he waved them as he approached Etienne's little office.

"Where are they, Etienne? You still don't know?"

"They don't trust me any more, Monsieur Lange."

"Don't try to fool me. You're too prominent in the Resistance to be under suspicion already."

Maybe later, but not now. You're simply afraid of your friends in the movement."

He swung out and slapped the doorman's face with his gloves. And again and again. Etienne only recoiled from the blows and pulled his head deeper into his shoulders. His sweater bunched up on his back like the feathers of a sparrow in the rain.

"You're going to be afraid of me more than your underground boys," Lange continued, pulling on his gloves and raising his voice. "You will, won't you, Etienne?"

"Yes, sir, Monsieur Lange."

"Tomorrow at the latest find out where they're hiding. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir, it is, Monsieur Lange."

The Gestapo man turned round and again confronted us, transformed by Etienne's fear from Nibelung into a man.

"Etienne did not keep his word because he really was under suspicion," he said. "But he tried his best, he wanted to betray them! He even betrayed the woman he loved. And, oh, how sorry he was. Not that he had betrayed her but that he couldn't get those two men that escaped. That's all right, Etienne, we'll correct the past. We can. We'll shoot the Russian and the American as escaped parachutists. The other Russian I'll simply hang. Now get them all over to the Gestapo! 'Patrol!'" he called.

The whole dark dusty lobby filled up with German soldiers, or so it seemed to me. I was surrounded, my hands were bound and I was kicked into the darkness. I fell, hit my leg and couldn't get up for a long time, and my eyes couldn't

make anything out until they were used to the reddish half-light that hardly at all was scattered by the rays of a tiny bulb. All three of us were lying on the floor of a narrow cell with no window, but the cell was moving, we were even tossed into the air and thrown to the side at turnings in the route. I concluded that we must be in a closed car.

The first to get up was Martin. I flexed my injured leg and extended it. Luckily there did not seem to be any broken bones. Zernov lay stretched out on the floor with his head resting on his arms.

"You're not hurt, are you, Boris Arkadievich?"

"Nothing yet," he answered curtly.

"What's your explanation of this show?"

"Yea, a real film," he grinned bitterly, but did not want to continue the conversation.

But I couldn't keep quiet.

"Somebody's past is being copied," I repeated. "We're in this past by accident. But where did this police van come from?"

"It couldn't have been standing at the entrance. Maybe it brought the submachine-gunners," Zernov ventured.

"Where are they?"

"They're probably in the cabin along with the driver. The rest are in the hotel waiting for orders from Lange. They might have been needed at that time too; he only slightly modified the past."

"You think this is his past?"

"What do you think?"

"Judging by our adventures before we met you, this is also the past of Etienne. They are modi-

fying one another. Only I don't grasp it: what's all this for?"

"You people forgot me!" put in Martin. "I don't understand any Russian."

"You're right, Martin," said Zernov, going over to English. "We did forget you for a minute here. And that's something we shouldn't do, and not only because of comradeship. We are bound in other ways too. You know what I've been thinking about all along?" he continued rising on his elbow on the muddy floor of the van. "Is what is happening accidental or not? I'm thinking of your letter to Anokhin, Martin, in particular what you said about us being labelled, that is, tagged by the cosmic newcomers. That's why we get involved so readily in all their activities. Now, is that accidental or is it not? Why wasn't some other routine plane flying the Melbourne-Jakarta-Bombey line modelled. They picked on our 'IL' simply because we were labelled. Is that an accident or isn't it? Suppose the 'clouds' get interested in American countryside life on their way northwards. I believe that's possible. Now why do they pick the town connected with Martin's life? And precisely at a time when he had planned to visit it. Again, is it by chance or not? And again, of all the cheap Parisian hotels, they pick on the Homond for their next experiment. Why? There are people with an exciting past in any hotel in Paris, practically in any house. The past of people in contact with us is modelled. Why? Again, is that a matter of chance or not? Might it not be prearranged, all done with a very specific purpose that is still hidden from us?"

Zernov, it appeared to me, was wide of the mark. The unaccountable happenings, the reality and illusory nature of these shifts in space and time, the sick world of Kafka that had become our reality could freeze any person with terror, yet I felt that we had not yet lost our self-control and customary clarity of thought. Martin and I looked at one another in the murky light of the van but did not say anything.

Zernov laughed.

"You think I'm off my rocker? Well, did you ever hear of Bohr's hypothesis of craziness as a mark of the truth of a scientific hypothesis? I don't lay any claims to the truth, I only suggest one of many possibilities. But is this the contact that thinking people have in mind? Are not the 'clouds' striving to speak with human beings through us? Aren't they trying to tell us what they are doing and why they are doing it? Maybe they are allowing us to enter into their experiments so as to reach our intellect, figuring that we will then be able to grasp the meaning of their experiments."

"A queer type of communication," I said doubtfully.

"Suppose there isn't any other kind? They might not even be acquainted with our means of communication. If they can't utilize optic, acoustic, or any other means of transmitting information that we know of, what then? Let us suppose they know nothing of telepathy, they don't know languages, the Morse code or any other of our signal systems. On the other hand, we are unfamiliar with their types of communication. What then?"

We were all thrown to the side as the van took another turn. Martin crashed against me, and I pushed into Zernov.

"I don't get you guys," Martin said angrily, "they are creating, modelling, seeking contact, and so we have to be hanged, shot and what not. Somebody's nuts if you ask me."

"They might not know this. The first experiments and, of course, mistakes."

"Very comforting as we hang!"

"I don't think we will," said Zernov.

I didn't have time to reply, the car shot upwards, the back broke into two pieces and a brilliant flash of light with a terrible crash of thunder that lasted a fraction of a second, then weightlessness and darkness.

Chapter XX

IRENE'S DOUBLE

With great difficulty I opened my lead-heavy eyelids, and a fierce piercing pain shot through the back of my head. High above me lights twinkled like fire-flies in the night. Were they stars? Was this the sky? I found the Big Dipper and realized I was out doors. It took me some time to move my head, and with every slight movement a piercing pain responded in the back of my head. Still I could make out the uneven blackness of the houses on the opposite side of the street which was wet with rain. It flickered in the darkness and I saw shadows in the middle of the street. A closer look told me they were the remnants of our van. Dark, shapeless pieces, asphalt

broken and piled up, or were they bags of something a short distance from me?

I was lying near the trunk of a tree that was barely distinguishable in the darkness, I could even touch its old wrinkly bark. I pulled myself up and got to a sitting position against the trunk. It became easier to breathe and the pain subsided. I didn't feel it any longer if I didn't move my head. My skull was intact I figured. I touched the back of my head and sniffed at my fingers, the liquid was not blood but oil.

Overcoming my weakness I rose to my feet hanging on to the tree all the while and continuing to peer into the empty darkness of the street. Finally, I started to walk falteringly on shaking feet, and made my way to the wreck—our van. "Boris Arkadievich! Martin!" I said softly. No answer. Finally I went up to something shapeless, stretched out on the pavement. A closer look.... It was half the body of a German in soldier's uniform. No feet, no face. That was all that was left of our escort. A couple of steps away I found a second body. He was hanging onto his gun with both hands, he was lying spread-eagled in boots, no head. All that was left of our car was a heap of fragments which in the dark looked like a crumpled newspaper. I went round it and at the curb and found Martin.

I recognized him immediately by the short suede jacket and stove-pipe trousers, no German soldiers ever wore them. I put my ear to his chest, it was rhythmically rising and falling; Martin was breathing. "Don!" I cried. He gave a jerk and whispered, "Who's that?" "Are you alive, man?" "Yuri?" "Yes, it's me, can you get

up?" He nodded. I helped him to his feet and got him onto the curb. He was breathing heavily and apparently had not yet got used to the darkness: his eyes blinked. We sat there a couple of minutes and then he said:

"Where are we? I can't see anything, maybe I've gone blind?"

"Look at the sky. Do you see any stars?"

"Yea, I can see stars okay."

"No broken bones?"

"Don't think so. What's happened?"

"Somebody must have thrown a bomb at our car. Where's Zernov?"

"I don't know."

I got up and went around the remains of our wreck and took a good look at the bodies of our escorts. Zernov was not there.

"The situation's bad," I said when I got back, "no sign of him."

"Were you looking at somebody?"

"Yes, the bodies of the guards. One has the head missing, the other's without feet."

"We in the back got out alive, so he must have too. He's probably gone some place."

"Without us? I don't think so."

"Maybe he returned?"

"Where to?"

"To real life. From this witch's wedding. He might be lucky, and we might be too."

I gave a whistle.

"We'll get out," Martin said, "just wait, we're sure to get out."

"Be quiet, listen!"

A heavy door behind us squeaked slowly and then opened up. A beam of bright light broke

through and tore away the heavy drapery at the door. It grew dark again, but the figure of a woman appeared in the flash of light. She was dressed in black. All I could see now was a hazy shadow. Subdued music was coming from beyond the door. A popular German waltz.

The woman, still almost indistinguishable in the dark, started down the staircase. Only the narrow sidewalk separated her from us. We sat still.

"What's the trouble?" she asked. "Has something happened?"

"Nothing much," I replied. "Our car's blown up, that's all."

"Yours?" she asked in surprise.

"The one in which we were riding or in which we were being driven, to be more precise."

"Who were you with?"

"Soldiers, an escort, naturally," I said a bit irritated.

"And that's all?"

"Do you want to collect the pieces?"

"Don't be angry. The chief of the Gestapo was supposed to be going by."

"Who? Lange?" I asked in surprise. "He's back there in the hotel."

"That's what was supposed to have happened," she said deep in thought. "That's exactly the way it happened. They blew up an empty van, that's all. Where are you from? Did Etienne think you people up too?"

"Nobody thought anybody up, Madame," I said. "We are here by accident and not of our own free will. Excuse me, I do not speak French so

well. It is difficult for me to explain. Perhaps you know English?"

"English?" again surprise. "But how can . . ."

"I can't explain that to you even in English. What is more, I'm not English anyway."

"Hello, ma'am," put in Martin, "but I'm from the States. You know the song, Yankee Doodle was in hell . . . and he says it's cool! Well, let me tell you, ma'am, it's hotter in this hell."

She laughed.

"What shall I do with you?"

"I'd just as soon dampen my parched throat," said Martin.

"Follow me. There's nobody in the cloak-room and I've let the hall-porter go. Your luck, Monsieur."

We followed her into a dimly lit cloak-room. The first thing I noticed were the German army raincoats on the hangers and the high-crown officer caps. Next to the cloak-room was a tiny closet-like affair without windows. The walls were pasted over with sheets from film magazines. It accommodated only two chairs and a table with a fat registry journal.

"Is this a hotel or a restaurant?" Martin asked the woman.

"The officer's casino."

For the first time I looked her straight in the face and was dumbfounded, paralyzed, speechless, like Lot's wife. She became tense, cautious, on guard.

"You surprised? Do you happen to know me?"

Then Martin said: "This is interesting."

I was silent.

"What's all this mean, Monsieur?" the woman asked.

"Irene," I said in Russian, "I don't get it."

Why is Irene here, in other peoples' dreams and in a dress of the forties?

"My god, he's Russian!" she exclaimed in Russian too.

"How did you get here?"

"Irene is my underground name. How do you happen to know it?"

"I don't know any underground names. I don't even know you have one. The only thing I know is that an hour ago we were having dinner in the Hotel Homond in Paris."

"There's been some mistake," she said estranged and coldly.

I was boiling.

"You don't recognize me? Rub your eyes."

"Who are you anyway?"

I forgot about the dress of the forties and the surroundings brought to life by alien recollections.

"Which one of us has gone mad? We came from Moscow just a little while ago. How could you have forgotten that?"

"When did we come?"

"Yesterday." I'm beginning to stutter.

"In what year?"

This time I was so dumbfounded, my mouth just opened—what could I say if she could ask a question like that?

"Don't be surprised, Yuri," Martin whispered behind me: he couldn't understand anything but guessed what was exciting me so. "This is not she but a werewolf."

She was still looking at me and Martin as total strangers.

"Memory of the future," she said mysteriously. "It may be that he thought of that at some time. Perhaps he even met you and her. Looks like me? And her name's Irene? Strange."

"Why?" I couldn't contain myself.

"Because I had a daughter named Irene. In 1940 she was about a year old. Osoverts took her to Moscow, before the fall of Paris."

"What Osoverts? The academician?"

"No, just a scientist. He worked with Paul Langevin."

A spark shot through the darkness. That's the way it is sometimes, you rack your brain over some problem and then all of a sudden you gain a hypnotizing flash of a solution.

"And what about you and your husband?"

"My husband left with the embassy for Vichy. He left later and alone. He stopped at some farm along the way, the water in the radiator was boiling, or maybe he simply wanted a drink of water. The roads were being bombed. That's all. A direct hit" She smiled wistfully, probably used to it by now, she smiled. "I smile this way because that is precisely the way Etienne imagines me. Actually, it was terrible, awful."

Everything coincided. Osoverts was not an academician yet at that time, but he had worked with Langevin. That I knew. Obviously, he was the one who had brought Irene up. And it was from him that she had learned about her mother. And about the similarity too, probably. But what has Etienne got to do with it all?

I couldn't but ask her about it. She laughed.

"The point is that I am his imagination. He is most likely thinking about me right this minute. He was in love with me, head over heels in love. And still and all he betrayed me."

I recalled the words of Lange: "He betrayed the woman he was desperately, hopelessly in love with. He wanted to betray so much." So this was before our encounter with the Gestapo. That means that in this life the reference system of time was quite different. It was shuffled like cards in a deck.

"Perhaps you want something to eat?" she suddenly asked in quite a human way.

"I wouldn't refuse a drink," said Martin, guessing at what the topic of conversation was.

She nodded, screwed up her eyes just like Irene and smiled. Even the smiles were the same.

"Wait for me here, no one will come. But if they do. . . . You of course haven't any weapons." She moved a board under the table and pulled out a handgrenade and a small flat Browning. "It's not a toy, don't laugh, very reliable, particularly at close range." She left. I took the Browning, Martin the handgrenade.

"That's Irene's mother," I said.

"This is getting worse and worse, where'd she come from?"

"She says Etienne conjured her up. She was with him in the Resistance during the war."

"Another werewolf," he said, and spat in disgust, "I'd like to heave this grenade into the whole bunch of them." He slapped his pocket.

"Don't get excited. They're real human beings. People, not puppets. This isn't Sand City."

"Human beings!" mocked Martin. "They know they are repeating somebody's life, they even know the future of the life they are duplicating. This is worse than 'Dracula'. D'ya ever see that film? About vampires. Dead in the daytime, alive at night. That's human beings for you. I'm afraid that after a night of happenings like that we'll need strait-jackets. If, of course, they don't knock us out. I wonder what the papers would say. Killed by visitors from the past life of Mr. Lange. Spectres with guns. Or something like that."

"Hey, pipe down," I said, "we might be heard. It's not so bad yet. We've even got guns. Maybe things will turn out all right."

Irene returned. I did not know her name and so, to myself, kept calling her Irene.

"I can't bring drinks in here," she said, "we might be seen. Let's go into the bar. They're all drunk in there, and two more guests will not mean anything. The barman has been warned. But tell the American to keep quiet and to answer all questions in French with 'Sore throat, can't speak.' What's your name? Martin. Repeat that, Martin, 'Sore throat, can't speak'."

Martin repeated the sentence in French a few times to get used to it. She corrected him.

"Okey, that'll do. You'll be safe for half an hour for sure. In half an hour Lange'll return with a miner and the submachine-gunners. There's an inside staircase leading from the bar into an upper room where General Baire is playing bridge. Under his table is a delayed-action mine, in forty-five minutes the building will explode."

"Jesus Christ!" I yelled. "Let's get a move on then."

"It won't, don't get excited," she said sadly. "Etienne has reported everything to Lange. I'll be caught upstairs in Baire's room, the miner will disconnect the timing device, and Lange will be promoted to Sturmbahnführer. You will wait a couple of minutes after he leaves and then you can leave quietly yourselves."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. That was a conversation for a psychiatric ward. But she continued:

"Don't be surprised. Etienne was not there at the time, but Lange remembers everything. He went into every corner and interrogated every one of the guests. He has an excellent memory. It took place exactly the way you will see it."

We followed without a word, trying not to look at one another and refusing to make sense of the events. There was no sense.

Chapter XXI

WE CHANGE THE PAST

There was a card game going in the first room. The stench was of tobacco smoke so thick you could hardly make things out. Like waves, it got thicker and then dispersed, but even in the more translucent moments everything looked strangely deformed, fluid, changing, as if the outlines of this world did not obey the laws of Euclidean geometry. A long ski-like arm would reach out, cards all extended, and hoarse voices overlapping, "five an 'nother five,... pass..."

lead. . .". Then the whole would be blanketed out by a tray with cognac, and on the long label somebody's face—like on TV—with neatly trimmed mustachios, or the face would be transformed into a placard with a mug yelling "VERBOTEN! VERBOTEN! VERBOTEN!" Or grey heads without faces, a voice in the smoke repeating "Thirty minutes, . . . thirty minutes." The cards rustled like leaves in the wind. The lights grew dim. Eyes smarted from the smoke.

"Irene," I called.

She turned around.

"I'm not Irene."

"It's all the same. What is this? The mirror-laughing room?"

"What's that?"

"Don't you remember? In the park? All those distorting mirrors?"

"No," she smiled. "It's simply that nobody remembers the surroundings exactly. The details. Etienne is trying to recall them. Lange has only fleeting disconnected glimpses, he cannot think through to minutiae."

I was stuck again. What was all this about? I had an inkling but not much more.

"This is a dream, sure thing," said Martin more confused than before.

"The memory cells of two persons are at work." I tried to find an explanation of some kind. "Conceptions are materialized, and they conflict, suppressing one another."

"Hogwash," he said.

We entered the bar. It was behind an archway separated from the hall by a curtain hung on bamboo poles. German officers were morosely

swilling liquor at the counter. No chairs. Couples on a long couch-like affair were kissing. I figured that Lange must have remembered this spectacle very well. But none of the performers even looked at us. Irene whispered to the barman and then disappeared in a hole in the wall where a stone staircase went up. The barman put two glasses of cognac in front of us and left. Martin tried it.

"The real thing," he said and licked his lips.

"Shh..." I hissed, "you're not an American, you're French."

"Sore throat, can't speak," he blurted out and winked slyly.

But nobody was listening to us. I looked at the clock. Lange was due in fifteen minutes. I got an idea. If Lange, say, does not reach the upper room, and the miner does not defuse the mine, General Baire and his bunch will neatly go up into a million pieces. That's interesting. Lange will arrive with a submachine-gunner and the miner. The miner most likely has no weapon, they'll leave the armed man near the entrance to the stairway. There's a chance.

In whispers I told Martin about my idea. He nodded. There was slight risk of the officers in the bar getting involved—they could hardly stand on their feet. Some were already snoring on the couch. The kissing couples had disappeared somewhere. The situation was very favourable.

Another ten minutes passed. Another minute, two, three. There were seconds left. That was when Lange entered. Not the Lange that we knew but the Lange of the past, not yet a Sturm-

bahnführer. If he recalled this episode, we did not participate and so we were out of danger. The actions were programmed by memory: reach the mine and prevent a catastrophe. He was accompanied by an oldish soldier in glasses and a very young Gestapo man with a submachine-gun. He went fast, not stopping anywhere, gave a piercing glance at the officers sitting round their cognac and hurried upstairs with the miner. They were in a hurry. As we guessed, the submachine-gunner remained at the bottom of the staircase. That very second Martin stepped up to him and, without swinging, punched straight to the nose and knocked him off his feet. He didn't even drop his gun. Martin grabbed him in the air. I had the Browning and raced up the stairs towards Lange who turned around. "Drop, Yuri," Martin shouted. I did and that instant a burst of fire cut down both of them: Lange and the miner. All this took a fraction of a second. Nobody even looked out of the bar room.

But, from above, "Irene" looked down. A few seconds passed, then slowly she began to descend, without asking any questions she passed the dead SS men crouching on the steps.

"Did anyone hear the shots?" I asked looking upwards.

"Nobody except me. They are so engaged in their game that they won't even hear the explosion." She shuddered and closed her face with her hands. "Oh, my God, they haven't defused the mine."

"That's perfect, on the contrary," I exclaimed. "Let the whole works go to hell. Come on, let's get out of here."

She still couldn't make things out.

"But that is not what happened then."

"That's what's going to happen now, though."

I grabbed her hand. "Is there another exit?"

"Yes."

"Then you lead the way."

She led the way as if walking in her sleep, she got us out to the dark street below. Martin wiped out the guard below in the same fashion.

"That's four," he said, "didn't even need the grenade."

"Five," I corrected him. "Your count began in the Antarctic."

"Now they'll have to begin modelling a heaven for them."

A few more words were exchanged as we ran down the middle of the street in an unknown direction in total darkness. Suddenly something exploded and then a burst of fiery sparks shot skywards. For an instant, "Irene's" enormous eyes flashed in front of me. It was only then that I noticed that this "Irene" was not wearing glasses.

A siren wailed in the distance. Then a car motor coughed into action. Then another. The blaze of the fire had now lit up the whole street.

"How could this be?" "Irene" suddenly asked. "That means I'm alive? Is this another life? Not that one?"

"Now it's developing independently, in accord with the laws of the time; we've turned it," I said and malevolently added: "Now you can take revenge on Etienne."

The siren was still screaming. Nearby, lorries were clattering down the street. I looked around.

Martin wasn't there. "Don!" I cried, "Martin!" Nobody responded. We bumped into the gate of a churchyard, it was open. In there it was dark, beyond the range of the light from the fire. "Here!" "Irene" whispered to me, taking me by the hand. I followed. Then the darkness suddenly began to melt away, flowing down a stairway that had opened up in front of us. Somebody was sitting on the upper step.

Chapter XXII

ON AN ISLAND OF SAFETY

I took a closer look and saw that it was Zernov.

"Boris Arkadievich, is that you?"

He turned around.

"Anokhin? Where'd you come from?"

I recalled Martin's Yankee Doodle song. Yes, but where was Martin?

"He isn't here," Zernov said. "I'm alone."

"Where are we?"

He laughed.

"You don't recognize the interior? Hotel Homond, second floor. I landed here when we were thrown out of the car. What happened afterwards?"

"Somebody threw a bomb under the wheels."

"That's luck," Zernov said, "well, I was kind of doubtful about the strength of the Gestapo anyway. But I wouldn't want to test fate any more. I've been sitting here from that minute and I'm afraid to move. After all, this is an island of safety. Familiar surroundings, not

spectres. So take a seat and let's hear what it's all about." He moved making room for me too.

However, my story did not make a great impression on Zernov, despite the gamut of unexpected events that ran through it. He listened without uttering a word or asking any questions: I asked:

"Have you seen Fellini's picture 'Juliet and the Ghosts'?"

Zernov wasn't even surprised by the question, though it promised agreement or perhaps argument. Zernov did not speak up and waited for my continuation. I continued: "My idea is that they and Fellini take a similar view of the world. A surrealistic nightmare. Everything is turned inwards, all reality is only the projection of somebody's thoughts, somebody's memory. If you had only seen that casino in St. Disier. The whole thing was smeared out, broken into fragments, deformed. The elements were there but the proportions were distorted. You recall in Fellini's world how the disconnected world of the subconscious mixes in with the world of reality. I'm after the logic of the matter but I'm unable to grasp it."

"Nonsense," Zernov interrupted. "You are simply not in the habit of analyzing and have not been able to connect the pieces of what you have witnessed. Fellini is far removed from all this. What has the cinema and art generally got to do with this? They model memory for motives that are not esthetic. Most likely God himself could not create a more exact model."

"Of what?" I was cautious.

"The psychic domains of certain of the visitors of the Homond Hotel."

"What visitors? There were a hundred people there. And we were tossed into the manure heap of a Gestapo man and this doorman. Why these two? Two standards of baseness or simply two random droplets of man's memory? And what precisely is it that is modelled? Ecstasy over the past or pangs of conscience? Then how does Irene's dream fit in here? And why were we allowed to dip into someone else's recollections yet prevented from touching another's dream? And why was Irene linked up with her mother, and why was the connection only on one side? The modelling is done of life suggested by someone's memory, and we are permitted to alter that life. But what kind of a model is it that does not replicate the original? Irene's mother stays alive, Lange is shot down by a burst of gunfire, and Etienne will probably be finished off by his own men. Why? In the name of supreme justice attained with our aid? I hardly think so; that would no longer be a model but creativity. Then what is real in this model and what is simply make believe? Whence flows the Moskva River and where does it break off? Perhaps it doesn't flow at all. Is the entire parapet made of granite or is the inside compressed smoke like in Sand City? Maybe the only reality in this model is myself, standing somewhere, whereas all the rest is a mirage, the projections of dreams and of memory. But of whose? What connection is there between it and the memory of Lange? Why connect the unconnect-

able? Why, in order to make contact with us, it is necessary to paste together the past and the present—what is more, an alien past—and then alter it? Millions of ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ and not one iota of logic.”

I said all that without stopping. A rose-coloured fog was billowing above us, condensing and turning crimson underneath, near the staircase. One could not distinguish things at a meter and a half distance. I counted six steps, the seventh was enveloped in red smoke.

“Still billowing,” said Zernov, catching my glance. “Let’s sit quiet until it strikes. There are some answers to our queries. You’ll answer them yourself after some thought. First of all, what is modelled? Not only the memory. The psychic make-up of the individual as well. Thoughts, wishes, recollections, dreams. Thoughts, as you know, are not always logical, associations are not always comprehensible, and recollections do not always follow events chronologically. Do not be surprised at the fragmentary nature or chaotic arrangement of what has been seen, this is not a film. Life, recreated by memory cannot be otherwise. Try to recall some eventful day of the past. Keep the events properly sequenced, from morning till evening. You’ll never do it. No matter how hard you try, you will lack coherency and sequence. Something will be forgotten, something left out, something will be recalled more vividly, something hazily, some act will slip by nebulously and indistinct, and you will make yourself miserable striving to catch at the recollection that is just beyond your grasp. But still this is life. It may be hazy and

alogical, but it is real and not concocted. Then of course there is the completely false."

I couldn't get it.

"False, why false?"

"Imagined," he explained. "Life created solely by the force of whim, fancy or simply supposition. Say, recalling something read or seen at a movie, and you imagine yourself the hero, offering this life concocted by someone as the real actuality, or something you yourself create, invent, make up. It's lucky you and I haven't as yet come across any such life, if you can call it such. So far..." he repeated deep in thought. "The encounter might still take place. Not excluded at all. Look how it's billowing..."

The red fluid was still flowing round the staircase. I sighed.

"Taking their time about today, it seems. And silent as hell, awful silence, no squeaks, not a rustle."

Zernov did not reply. A few seconds passed before he said, in a worried tone, "The curious thing is that every time we are given full freedom of action, they do not interfere or control us. And they give us to understand as much."

"Martin and I never realized that," I said. "I still don't understand why we were allowed to alter the model?"

"Well, you have the stimulus of experimentation, don't you? They are studying, trying and combining things. Say, an exposure of somebody's memory is obtained, a picture of the past. But this is not a film, only the course of a life. The past becomes, as it were, the present and ready to form the future. Now, do we have a

new factor in the present The future will unavoidably change. We are the new factor, the basis of the experiment. With our help, they get two exposures of the same picture and can compare them. You think they understand everything we do? Most likely not. That's why they try one experiment after the other."

"Yea, and meanwhile our hair stands on end," I said.

It seemed to be getting lighter. Zernov noticed it too.

"How many steps do you see?" he asked.

"Ten," I counted.

"There were six before, I counted them. The rest was a blur of red. I'm fed up with this 'isle of safety'. My back's aching. Let's risk it, what do you say? Over to my room. We'll at least get some rest, like human beings."

"Mine's a floor above yours."

"Mine's right here," Zernov pointed to the nearest door that was still enveloped in red smoke. "Let's try."

We dived into the flowing cloud of red, cautiously approached the door. Zernov opened it and we went in.

Chapter XXIII

A CLASH

But there was no room at all. No ceiling, no walls, no floor. Instead, a broad roadway opened up before us, grey from the dust. All about was grey, the bushes along the road, the woods beyond, all cockeyed, grotesquely distorted like

the drawings of Gustav Doré, above this dirty ragged clouds crawled.

"We risked it," said Zernov turning round. "Where has it gotten us?"

On the right the road went down towards a river hid by a small hill, to the left it turned round an enormous oak tree, also grey, as if freshly powdered with lead dust. From that direction came the sounds of a shepherd's or, more likely, child's pipe because the melody was very primitive, monotonous with the same importunate sad refrain.

We went over to the other side of the highway and beheld the most unlikely procession imaginable. A few dozen kids, little kids, dressed in shirts reaching to their knees and in pants, in tiny fur-trimmed jackets and in hoods and tassels. Heading the procession was a ragged man in the very same absurd jacket and short pants. He had on long woollen stockings and heavy shoes with tin buckles. He was the one who was piping the song that so hypnotized the children. Hypnotized is the word because the kids moved as if in a trance, speechless, never turning their heads to right or left. The leader kept on playing and kept on plunking his heavy feet down in a soldier's march, throwing up clouds of grey dust.

"Hey," I yelled, when the curious procession had come up to us.

"Leave'm alone," Zernov said. "That's a fairy tale."

"A fairy tale?"

"You know, the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

Off in the distance, in an opening in the curved

woods, rose Gothic spires of a medieval town. The children kept following the Pied Piper who had hypnotized them.

I had wanted to grab the last one, barefoot in ragged pants, but I stumbled over something and spread out there on the road. Nobody even so much as turned his head.

"Strange dust," I said knocking it out of my clothing, "Doesn't leave any traces."

"Maybe there isn't any dust at all. And no road either," said Zernov with a smirk, and added, "False life, remember?"

The solution to the riddle that had plagued me for so long at last percolated through.

"You know why it's so grey all about? It's from the line illustrations to the fairy tale done in pencil or pen. Lines and blur, no colours at all. An illustration from a children's book."

"We even know from which one. Remember the little girl and the curé at the table d'hôte?"

I did not answer, something changed instantaneously. The piping ceased. A distant clack of hooves on the road took its place. The familiar red fog enveloped the bushes. Incidentally, it vanished almost immediately and the bushes stretched out along the roadway all green. The woods disappeared and the road broke off into a steep rocky decline, beyond which vineyards sloped away. Lower still, just like in the Crimea, was a blue sea. Everything about took on its natural colours: the blue of the sky showing through breaks in the clouds, the red spots of clayey soil between rocks and the yellow of sun-burnt grass. Even the dust on the road was, you might say, suntan.

"There's somebody coming on horseback," said Zernov, "the show isn't over yet."

Three horsemen emerged from a turn in the road. They were coming single file, behind them were two horses both with saddles. The cavalcade came to halt near where we stood. All three of them were in different cuirasses and identical long black coats with copper buttons. Their jack boots, turned reddish from long wear, were covered with grey mud.

"Who are these?" asked the senior horseman in broken French. Away from his black moustache stretched a week's growth of stubble. In his museum-piece cuirass and sheathless sword stuck into his belt, he seemed to have stepped right out of an old novel.

"What century is it?" I asked myself mentally. "The thirty-years war or later? The soldiers of Wallenstein or Karl the Twelfth? Or the Swiss Reiters in France? And in what France? Before Richelieu or after?"

"Papists?" asked the horseman.

Zernov laughed. This masquerade was getting to be funny indeed.

"We have no faith," he replied in good French, "we're not even Christians. We're atheists."

"What's that he says, Captain?" asked the junior horseman. He spoke German.

"I do not know myself," he said switching to German. "Strange dress too, like comedians at the fair."

"Perhaps this is a mistake, Captain. They may not be the ones."

"And where will we look for those? Let Bonn-

ville himself investigate. Come along," he added in French.

"I can't," said Zernov.

"What?"

"I don't know how to ride a horse."

The horseman laughed and said something in German. Now all three laughed. "So he can't ride horseback! A doctor, no less."

"Put him in the middle. You two on the sides, one foot apiece. And see that he doesn't fall off. And you?" the black moustache turned to me.

"I don't intend to go anyway," I said.

"Yuri, don't argue!" Zernov yelled in Russian—he was already seated on the horse holding onto the pommel of the saddle. "Agree to everything and hold off as long as possible."

"What's the language he speaks?" asked the black-moustache frowning. "Gipsy?"

"Latin," I growled. "Dominus vobiscum. Let's get going."

And I jumped into the saddle. It was not English, not modern, but of an old unfamiliar shape with copper badges at the corners. That did not disturb me, I had learned to ride horseback at the institute riding club that taught most of the elements of the modern pentathlon. Back in the old days a certain brave man volunteered to deliver an urgent message. He overcame all obstacles in his way: he jumped, ran, swam a rushing river, used firearms, and his sword. At the club we weren't taught that much, but we learned some of the elements. One thing, I wasn't very good at clearing obstacles on horseback. "If ever a fence or ditch turns up along the way, I'll never make it," I thought to myself apprehensive-

ly. But there was no time to think. The black moustache lashed my horse and we took off, catching up with Zernov with his side bodyguards. His face was whiter than paper, quite naturally, since this was his first ride in a saddle and what is more, in a furious race!

We pounded along without a word spoken, the black moustache always close by. I heard the thud of the hooves of my horse, the heavy panting, the warmth of its neck, the tense resistance of the stirrups—no, this was no illusion, no deception, this was real life, a different alien life in other space and time, life that had sucked us under like a swamp its victims. The closeness of the sea, the warm humidity of the air, the twisting rocky road, vineyards on the slopes, unfamiliar trees with large broad leaves shining brightly in the sunlight, donkeys slowly dragging squeaky two-wheeled carts, one-storey stone houses in the villages, mica windows and garlands of drying red pepper, crude sculptures of madonnas near wells, men with bronze-tan torsos in ragged trousers reaching to their knees, women in homespun dresses, and completely naked children—this was a picture of the south, the south of France, and of no modern France either.

We galloped for about an hour. Luckily there were no major obstacles, except huge boulders along the roadside, the remnants of landships cleared away long ago. A white stone wall half as high again as a man brought us to a halt. The wall surrounded a woods or park several kilometres on one side because the end was nowhere in sight. Here, where the wall turned northwards from the sea, was a man waiting. He was dressed

in the same fancy-ball costume of green velvet and in well-worn reddish boots like those of my companions and in a hat without feathers but with a large brightly shined copper buckle. His right hand was in a sling made of rags, perhaps from an old shirt, one eye was covered with a black patch. There was something familiar in the face, though it was not the face that interested me but the sword at his side. Out of what century had this d'Artagnan appeared, though this one resembled more a common scarecrow than my favourite hero of childhood.

The horsemen dismounted and pulled down Zernov. He could not even stand and slumped to the grass by the roadway. I wanted to help him, but the one-eyed man was already at his side.

"Get up," he said to Zernov. "Can you stand?"

"I can't", Zernov groaned.

"What shall I do with you?" asked the one-eyed man worried, and then turned to me. "I've seen you some place before."

I recognized him at once. This was Mongeusseau, the interlocuter of the Italian movie man at the restaurant, Mongeusseau, rapierist and swordsman, Olympic champion and the first sword of France.

"Where did you pick them up?" he asked the black moustache.

"On the road. Aren't they the ones?"

"Don't you see? What am I going to do with them?" he repeated at a loss. "I'm no longer Bonnaville with them."

A red cloud boiled up on the road. Out of the foam came a head, then black silk pajamas. I recognized the producer Carresi.

"You are Bonnville and not Mongeousseau," he said. The corners of his lips and his sunken cheeks trembled terribly as he spoke. "You are somebody from another age. Clear?"

"I have my memory," objected the one-eyed man.

"Then stamp it out. Switch out. Forget everything outside the film."

"Do these people have any relation to the film?" and the one-eyed glanced in my direction. "Have you warned them?"

"No, of course not. That is the act of a different will. I am powerless to extract them. But you, Bonnville, can."

"How?"

"Like a Balzac hero freely creating the plot. My thoughts only direct you. You are the master of the plot. Bonnville is a mortal enemy of Savari. That is crucial to you at the present. But remember: without the right hand!"

"As a lefty I won't even be allowed to contest?"

"As the left-hander Mongeousseau, not even today. As a lefty, Bonnville living in another age will fight with his left hand."

"Like a schoolboy."

"Like a tiger."

The cloud again boiled up consuming the film producer and then melted away. Bonnville turned to the dismounted horsemen.

"Throw him over the wall." He nodded in the direction of Zernov lying on the ground. "Let Savari nurse him himself."

"Wait a minute!" I cried.

But the point of Bonnville's sword was at my chest.

"Worry about yourself," he said imperiously.

Zernov was already on the other side of the wall, not even having had time to cry out.

"Murderer," I exclaimed.

"Nothing's going to happen to him," Bonnville grinned. "The grass is up to your waistline over there. He'll rest for a while and then get up. Meanwhile let's not be wasting any time. Defend yourself!" He raised his sword.

"Against you? That's ridiculous."

"Why?"

"Because you are Mongeousseau, Champion of France."

"You are mistaken, I am Bonnville."

"Don't try to fool me, I heard your conversation with the producer."

"With whom?" he asked, failing to grasp what I had said.

I looked him straight in the eye. He was not playing any role, he indeed had failed to understand.

"You must have been seeing things."

It was useless to argue: here, before me, was a switch-over man devoid of his own memory. The film producer had done the thinking for him.

"Defend yourself," he repeated severely.

I purposely turned my back to him.

"What for? I don't intend to in the least."

The point of the sword bit into my back, not deep, just through the jacket and enough for me to feel it. The most important thing was that I did not doubt for a moment that the sword would

have pierced me through if he had struck with more force. I don't know how someone else would have acted in my place, but suicide does not have any attractions for me. To fight Mongeusseau would have been tantamount to committing suicide, but it was not Mongeusseau that had bared his sword, but lefty Bonnville. How long would I stand up against him? One minute, two minutes? Perhaps a bit longer, who knows.

"Are you going to defend yourself?" he repeated once again.

"I am unarmed."

"Captain, your sword, please!" he cried.

The black moustache, standing at some distance, threw me his sword. I caught it by the handle.

"Well done," Bonnville remarked.

The sword was light and sharp as a needle. It did not have the tip covering the point of the weapon in sporting contests that I was used to. But the wrist was protected by the familiar spherical guard. The grip was likewise convenient. I cut the air with it and heard the swish that recalled the days I fought for my team.

"L'attack de droit," said Bonnville.

I translated to myself "attack from the right". Bonnville was warning me condescendingly that he was not afraid to open up his plans to me. At that same instant he struck.

I parried the blow.

"Parré," he said. In fencing lingo, that means to congratulate on a successful defence.

I retreated a little, protecting myself with the sword, which was somewhat longer than Bonnville's, thus giving me an advantage in defence. I

tried to recall the words of my fencing instructor in the old days: "Don't let yourself be fooled; he will retreat and your sword will cut the air. Do not attack too soon." I made believe I was reverting to the defence. He jumped softly, cat-like, and dealt a blow from the left this time.

Again I parried it.

"Clever," Bonnville remarked. "You have intuition. Your luck that I attack with my left. You would be finished if it were with the right."

His blade, went for me like a slender darting tentacle, quivering, as if in search. He was after an opening in my defence, even the tiniest. Our blades were holding a silent conversation. Mine said: "You won't get me, I'm longer than you. Just turn aside and I'll get your shoulder." His said: "You won't get away. See how I'm closing the distance? I'll get you in the arm now." Mine replied: "You won't have time. I'm above, and I'm longer than you are." But Bonnville got around the length of my sword, he took it aside and then dealt a lighting blow. However, the blade only pierced my jacket and skimmed the skin of my body. Bonnville frowned.

"Let's take off our coats," and he stepped back.

I remained where I stood. Without my jacket, in my shirt, and I felt freer. And perhaps more defenceless. In our sport contests we usually put on special jackets that were sewn with fine metal threads. When the sword contacted the metal threads, the blow was recorded electrically. Here a blow was a real one. The blade dipped into living tissue and cut blood vessels. It could wound deeply, even kill. True, we were in the same situation, but our skills differed. The blades of our

swords struck in the same way, our shirts both freely opened up our bodies to the opponent. But my tight short sports shirt couldn't match his white silken shirt, like the one Paul Scofield played Hamlet in.

We crossed swords. I recalled yet another one of my instructor's warning: do not attack too soon, not until your opponent has just for an instant lost his feeling of distance. Wait until he opens up. But Bonnville did not open up. His sword buzzed around my chest like a wasp, ready to sting. But I retreated and parried blow after blow. What luck that he fought with his left hand, I anticipated all his movements.

Bonnville was obviously reading my thoughts.

"With my left all I can do is stitch boots," he said. "Would you like to see my right?"

He took his arm out of the sling and tossed the sword over to his other hand. Its blade flashed, knocked mine aside and hit me in the chest.

"That's the way it's done," he boasted, but did not have time to continue.

Somebody, unseen, reminded him:

"Use your left, Bonnville, your left! Take away the right!"

Bonnville obediently switched hands. The red spot on my chest was spreading.

"Bandage it," said Bonnville.

I was stripped of my shirt and my shoulder was bandaged. It was not a deep wound but a lot of blood was flowing. I flexed and extended my right arm: there was no pain. I could still play for time.

"Where did you study?" asked Bonnville. "In Italy?"

"Why? What makes you think so?"

"Your defence is very much like the Italian way. But that will not help you."

I laughed and almost let him pass, for he was waiting for me on the right. I hardly had time to back down, his sword only slid along my shoulder. I parried it upwards and, in my turn, dealt a blow.

"Well done," he said.

"There's blood on your hand."

"Nothing to worry about."

His sword again whirled about me. I parried, retreated, and my fingers gripping the handle felt like ice. I repeated to myself, "Don't fall, the main thing is not to fall, don't fall!"

"Don't drag it out, Bonnville," said the invisible voice, "there are not going to be any re-takes."

"There won't be anything," Bonnville replied, retreating a bit and giving me a breathing spell. "I can't get him with my left."

"Then he'll get you. I'll change the plot. But you are a superman, Bonnville. That's the way I have devised you. Act! Courage, man!"

Bonnville again stepped towards me.

"So there was a conversation," I said with a snigger.

"What conversation?"

This was again a robot that forgot everything with the exception of his ultra-task. Suddenly I felt a wall at my back. There was no room for further retreat. "The end," I thought to myself helplessly.

His sword again caught mine, flashed back and then ran into my neck. I did not feel any pain,

but something gurgled in my throat. My knees gave way, I fell on my sword, but it slipped from my hands. The last I heard was an exclamation as if from another world:

“That’s it.”

Part four

CONTACT

ESTABLISHED!

Chapter XXIV

AWAKENING

What followed I saw as fragments, a disconnected sequence of nebulous white patterns. The white spot of the ceiling above me, white curtains at the windows that did not darken the room, and white sheets at my chin. In this whiteness I suddenly recognized some sort of nickel-plated cylindrical surfaces, long tubes that coiled like snakes, and some faces bent over me.

"He's conscious," I heard.

"I see. Anesthesia."

"Everything's ready, Professor."

All this conversation was in French, fast French that penetrated to my consciousness or skimmed across a chaos of obscure coded terms. Then everything was blanked out—light, thoughts,

everything—then again a fresh awakening in white. Again unfamiliar faces bent over me, polished surfaces of scissors or a spoon, a wrist-watch or a needle. At times the nickel gave way to the transparent yellow of rubber gloves or the rosy sterility of hands with close-cut nails. All of this lasted only a short time, then again dropped into darkness where there was no space, no time, only the black vacuum of sleep.

Then the pictures gradually straightened out as if someone at controls were bringing them into focus. The peaked strict face of the professor in white cap faded into a still more drawn face of the nurse in white headgear. I was fed broth and juices, my throat was swathed and I was told not to talk.

Somehow, however, I got out the words:

"Where am I?"

Rough hands of the nurse clamped down on my lips.

"Silence. You are in the clinic of Professor Peletier. Take care of your throat. Do not talk."

Once, a very familiar face bent down towards me with tinted glasses in gold frames on.

"You?" I exclaimed and did not recognize my own voice, neither hoarse nor the scream of a bird.

"Tss..." And she too covered my mouth, but so carefully, so lightly. "Everything's all right, my love. You are getting well but you must not speak yet. Be silent and wait. I will return soon, very soon. Now go to sleep."

I slept, and woke up again, and I felt my throat become freer, I could taste the broth they

gave me; then again the jab of a needle, again the dark emptiness until finally I woke up for good. I could speak, yell, sing—and I knew it, there wasn't even any bandage.

"What is your name?" I asked my usually stern-faced guest in the white cap.

"Sister Therese."

"Are you a nun?"

"We are all nuns in this clinic."

She did not stop me from yelling "hurrah", and I asked her without hidden guile, "So the Professor is catholic, isn't he?"

"The Professor will burn in hell," she replied without a smile, "but he knows that we are the most skilled nurses. That is our vow."

"I'll probably burn in hell too," I thought and so changed the subject.

"How long have I been in the clinic?"

"This is the second week after the operation."

"So he's an atheist?" I sniggered.

She sighed, "These are all the affairs of God."

"And the rose clouds too?"

"In the Encyclical of His Holiness they are proclaimed to be made by human hands. The creation of our brethren of the Universe created in the image of God."

I saw that His Holiness had given way to the lesser evil, casting his lot with the anthropocentric hypothesis. That was the only way out for the Christian world. But for science? What hypothesis did the Congress uphold? And why is it that I still don't know anything about this matter?

"Is this a hospital or a jail?" I raged. "And why am I being starved with sleep?"

"Not starved but treated. This is sleep therapy."

"Aren't there any newspapers around here? Why can't I have something to read?"

"Complete cut-off from the outside world is also part of the treatment. When the course of treatment is over, you'll have all the papers you want."

"And when will that be?"

"As soon as you are well."

"And when. . ."

"Ask the Professor."

In a way, this was funny, but I wasn't getting anywhere so I decided an attack from the flank.

"Well, I certainly am much better, don't you think so?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Then, why am I not allowed visitors? Or have I been forgotten?"

You have to be a nun to stand up to a patient like that. Sister Therese withstood it all, except once. Something like a smile even ran across her imperturbable lips.

"Today is visitor's day. It begins in. . ." and she looked at her watch, whose reflections I had seen so many times during my awakenings, "in ten minutes."

I got through those ten minutes as submissive as a lamb. I was even allowed to sit up in bed and talk without looking at the clock, my vocal chords had healed completely. But Irene said:

"I'll do the talking, you ask questions."

But I didn't want to ask anything, I just wanted to repeat "dearest, dearest, dearest" It

was funny how it all happened: no explanations, no sighing, no hints, no play. The whole preparatory work was carried out by my opponent Bonnaville—Mongeusseau. I wonder whether Irene knew about that. Yes, it turned out, she did. She got it all from Zernov. She herself during all this time was in a kind of trance, a dream yet not a dream, a complete blot-out of all memory. She woke up, it was morning, drowsiness. She was drowsy, didn't want to get up.

"And you meanwhile were bleeding to death in Zernov's room at the hotel. Luckily he got here in time, you were still breathing."

"Where did he come from?"

"From below, from the hall. He himself had been knocked almost unconscious, his whole body was beaten up. Miracles! Almost as if you had come back from the crusades."

"Must have been somewhat later. The sixteenth century, I believe. Swords without sheaths, and slender blades fast as lightning!"

"Why? Did you fight? You're some musketeer! You have to know how!"

"We were taught a bit in the institute, movie people have to know everything. That's when it came in handy."

"Very helpful on the operating table."

"But I was ambushed. Behind was a wall, a ditch on one side. And he was good!"

"Who was this?"

"Mongeusseau. Try standing up to an Olympic champion. Remember the guy with the eye patch at the table d'hôte?"

Irene was not surprised.

"He's here in the hotel right now too. And he's together with Carresi. Incidentally, I took him for a movie actor, for some reason. With the exception of us, these two are the only guests that did not leave the hotel after that night. Boy, that was some panic! And the doorman even committed suicide, he hanged himself."

"Which one?" I exclaimed.

"That one, the baldheaded one."

"Etienne?" I asked to make sure. "Why?"

"Nobody knows. He didn't even leave a note. But I think Zernov has some suspicions."

"Marvellous," I exclaimed, "A dog's death for a dog."

"You have suspicions too?"

"I don't suppose anything, I know!"

"What?"

"It'd take a long time to tell. Not now."

"Why are you hiding things from me?"

"Certain things need not be revealed now. You'll learn about them later. Don't be offended, it's for the best. Now tell me what happened to Lange. Where is he?"

"He's left. It seems he's left Paris for good. He got into some kind of a fix too." She laughed. "Martin for some reason put him through a meat-grinder, you wouldn't recognize him now. At least not during the first few days. There was talk it'd develop into a diplomatic scandal, but nothing happened. The West Germans were quiet as mice. Martin's an American and the right hand of Thompson. Local Ribbentropites find that too hard a nut to crack. Then Lange himself all of a sudden relinquished all claims. He said you couldn't deal with a madman. Newsmen attacked

Martin for an explanation and he served up whiskey and reported that Lange wanted to get the Russian girl away from him. He meant me. A lot of fun and laughter but there's something mysterious behind it all. Martin has now left together with Tompson. Don't look so surprised. That's a long story to tell too. I've collected all the paper clippings, you can read them. There's also a note for you from Martin, but not a word about the fight. But I think that Zernov knows something on that score. Yes, tomorrow he's speaking at the plenary session. All the reporters are waiting like sharks, and he keeps putting it off. All because of you, incidentally. He wants to have a talk with you first. Right now. Surprised again? Really, I mean it, right now."

Zernov appeared as fast as they do in movies. He wasn't alone. He was accompanied by Carresi and Mongeusseau. He couldn't have produced a greater effect. I opened my mouth as I recognized Mongeusseau and did not even respond to their greetings.

"He recognizes you," said Zernov to his companions in English. "And you wouldn't believe it."

Then I went off the handle; luckily it was easier to go off the handle in any other language except Russian.

"I have not gone mad nor have I lost any of my memory. It would be hard to forget the sword that cut my throat."

"And you remember the sword?" asked Carresi, for some reason overjoyed.

"It's the last thing I'll forget."

"And your own?" Carresi even rose to his

feet, he was so excited. "From Milan, a steel snake at the guard coiled round the handle, remember?"

"Let him remember," I said maliciously, nodding in the direction of Mongeousseau.

The latter did not seem offended, nor was he embarrassed in the least.

"I've had it since 1960. The prize of Toulouse," he replied flegmatically.

"That's where I remember it from. Both the blade and the snake," put in Carresi again.

But Mongeousseau was not listening.

"How long did you last?" he asked, looking at me with interest for the first time. "One minute, two minutes?"

"More," I said. "You were fighting with your left hand."

"Makes no difference. My left is much weaker, hasn't the lightness that is needed. But in training..." For some reason, he did not finish the sentence and changed his tone of voice: "I know your swordsmen, I've encountered them in contests, but I don't remember you. You weren't taken off the team, were you?"

"I gave up fencing," I said; I didn't want to let him know too much. "I gave it up a long time ago."

"Too bad," he said slowly and looked at Carresi.

I never found out what he was sorry about: about my losing interest in swordplay or that his fight with me took him more than two precious minutes of the champion's time. Carresi noticed my perplexed look and laughed:

"Gaston wasn't present at the fight."

"What do you mean, wasn't there?" I asked in astonishment. "Who was then?"

I cautiously ran my fingers over the slanting healed slit across my throat.

"Blame me," said Carresi in confusion. "I thought the whole thing up at home lying on my couch. Gaston, who was synthesized and given an identically synthesized sword, is the fruit of my imagination. How it was done, I certainly do not understand. But the real honest to God Gaston never even touched you. So don't be angry."

"Honestly, I don't even remember you at the table d'hôte," added Mongeusseau.

"False life," Zernov reminded me of our talk on the stairs. "I allowed for modelling of suppositions or imagined situations," he explained to Carresi.

"And I didn't allow for anything," Carresi objected impatiently. "I didn't want to have anything to do with that world-wide scandal. At first I simply refused to believe it, like those flying saucers, then I saw your film and was pertified: that was it! For a whole week I could not think of one single thing except that. Then I got used to the idea, like you get used to something unusual and quite far-fetched but repeated a sufficient number of times. Professional interests took me away from common sense and a good heart: even on the eve of the Congress I could think of nothing except my new picture. I wanted to revive an historical film, not Hollywood syrup and not a museum piece, but something re-evaluated by the eyes and minds of people of today. I chose the age, the heroes and, as you people put it, the socio-historical background. Then

at the restaurant I found a 'star' and convinced him. There was only one thing he didn't like: fighting with his left hand. But, you see, that was my lookout, strange as it may seem. I remember him at fencing contests. The sword in his right hand—it would be too professional, he wouldn't be able to enter the image. Now in the left hand, he was a God! There were threats and mistakes and anger with himself and a miracle of naturalness. I convinced him. We parted. Then I lay down in my hotel room, thinking. A red light bothered me. The hell with it, I closed my eyes. And I imagined the whole scene, the road high above the sea, the rocks, the vineyards, the white wall of the Count's park. And then this craziness: the hirelings of Gaston—he's Bonnaville in the play—stop some bums on the road. Well, not bums, tourists, if you like, outsiders, in a word. The age is changed and the plot too. I want to throw them out but I can't, they're just stuck there. So then I switch round and include them too. This produces a new plot, very original: say, the bums are wandering actors. Now Gaston, quite naturally, at home is thinking about the film, not about the plot but about himself, his dilemma of fighting either with his left or his right. Mentally, I get into an argument with him: I get excited, try to convince him, then demand subordination. Period!"

"I saw that," I recalled. "A pile of crimson foam near the road, and then you stepped out like a devil from a box."

Carresi closed his eyes, obviously trying to visualize what he had heard and was again pleased.

"Now that's an idea! A marvellous angle for the plot. Let's restore everything that happened and exactly the way it occurred. In short, do you want to play together with Gaston?"

"Thanks a lot," I said hoarsely, "I don't want to die a second time."

Mongeusseau smiled politely but with a certain amount of guile.

"In your place, I would refuse too. But drop in to see me on Rivoli for a friendly visit. We'll cross swords. Don't be afraid, they're only for training. Everything according to regulations, outfit and masks. I want to try you out a bit, and find out how you stood up so long. I'll work with my left on purpose."

"Thanks," I repeated, but knew that I would never again see him.

Chapter XXU

ASSIGNMENT: GREENLAND

When the producer and the swordsman had left, a strange uncomfortable silence set in. I contained myself with difficulty exasperated by this unneeded visit. Zernov laughed, waiting to find out what I would say. Irene, noticing at once the import of the pause, remained silent as well.

"Angry?" asked Zernov.

"Positively," I said. "You think it's fun being polite to that murderer?"

"Mongeusseau is not to blame, even indirectly," Zernov continued. "That's what I have just figured out."

"Presumption of innocence," I taunted.

He did not respond.

"It's my fault, I got you two together on purpose, don't be angry. I wanted to correlate the model with the source. For my paper I had to have a perfect check on what was modelled, whose psyche. And what is more important—the memory or imagination. Now I know. They have dipped into both. The other one simply wanted to go to sleep; probably going over Carresi's proposition lazily: not too much work, it would seem, and the pay not so bad. But Carresi created, he was the one who contrived the conflicts, the dramatic situations, in a word, the illusion of real life. It was the illusion that they modelled. And rather exactly, incidentally. Remember the landscape? Vineyards on the background of the sea. More exact than a photograph."

I involuntarily touched my throat.

"And this? Another illusion?"

"That's an accident. While experimenting they probably did not even realize that it was dangerous."

"I don't get it," Irene interrupted, continuing her own thoughts, "there must be something else to all this, and not life. Biologically it can't be life, even if it reproduces life. Life can't be made out of nothing."

"Why out of nothing? They probably have some sort of building material, a kind of primary matter of life."

"The red fog?"

"Perhaps. So far nobody has found any explanation, nobody has even advanced a hypothesis," Zernov sighed. "Don't expect hypotheses tomorrow from me either. I'm simply going to express

a supposition of what is modelled and why. As to how it is done—that's beyond me...."

I laughed.

"Somebody will get to an explanation. Live and see."

"Where?"

"Where do you think? At the Congress naturally."

"You won't see anyone."

Zernov smoothed his straight light hair. He always did that before saying something unpleasant.

"It won't work," I said maliciously. "You won't hold me here. I'm well."

"I know. The day after tomorrow you will be discharged. And in the evening you can pack your suitcases."

He said it so firmly and decisively that I jumped up out of bed.

"A recall?"

"No."

"So it's to Mirny again?"

"And not to Mirny either."

"Then where to?"

Zernov was silent, smiling, he gave a quick sidelong glance at Irene.

"Suppose I don't agree?" I said.

"You'll agree. You'll be all too eager. In fact, you'll grab at the chance."

"Come on, Boris Arkadievich. Where to?"

"Greenland."

My face obviously spelled such disappointment that Irene burst out laughing.

"He doesn't jump, Irene".

"No, he doesn't."

I lay back on purpose.

"There's no dope to make me jump. But why to Greenland?"

"There'll be dope enough," said Zernov and winked at Irene.

Irene, imitating the TV news announcer, began:

"Copenhagen. Our special correspondent reports that pilot observers of the United States polar station at Soenre Stremfiorde (Greenland) have detected a curious artificial or natural phenomenon to the north of the seventy-second parallel of latitude, in the area of Simpson's expedition. . . ."

I rose up on my pillows.

"...over an extensive ice-covered plateau, blue kilometre-long protuberances have been observed. Something in the nature of a diminished Aurora Borealis, only along an enormous ellipse in a close band of blue fire. The tongues of flame merge roughly at an altitude of one kilometre forming the surface of an immense octahedron. That's it, isn't it, Boris Arkadievich?"

I fell back on the bed.

"Now are you ready to jump, Anokhin?"

"I seem to be ready."

"Now listen. Reports of this 'aurora' have appeared in all the papers. The octahedron shines for hundreds of kilometres. It cannot be approached either on foot or on tractor: our familiar invisible wall repulses all oncomers. Aircraft have been unable to come down from above, they are turned aside. The suspicion is that this is a powerful field of force that the space beings have set up. Now do you jump?"

"Definitely. Boris Arkadievich, that means they are already in Greenland."

"Have been for some time. But deep in the interior of the plateau they seem to have something new. Fire, yet instruments nearby do not register the slightest increase in temperature. Neither is there any rise in atmospheric pressure or in ionization. Radio communications are not interrupted even a few metres away from the protuberances. Geiger counters are suspiciously silent. Strange camouflage, rather like a kid's kaleidoscope. The flashing of broken glass and that's all. The photos we have don't seem to make sense. A clear sky on a sunny day reflected in enormous crystalline facets of a crystal. But the 'horsemen' go through like birds into a cloud. But real birds bounce back like tennis balls. Attempts were made with pigeons, complete failure."

I was bitterly jealous of my colleagues for getting in to shoot that scene!

Zernov was not so elated, he thought there might be great danger in the whole affair. He said: "You know what the activities around this thing are now called? 'Operation T' after our friend Tompson. He himself says that this is a personal search for contact. He says that before he took over, everything had been tried, and in vain: light signals, radio waves, mathematical codes, and all manner of figures traced in the sky by jet planes. The horsemen refuse to respond. But he says he'll make contact. So far nobody knows with what media, and he isn't communicative either. However, the core of the expedition has already been formed and has been sent to Upernivik. That's where the Greenland expe-

dition of Koch-Wegener started out from in 1913. They are supported by a cargo-passenger aircraft, a helicopter borrowed from the Tutie base, two tracked vehicles and aerosleighs. Not so badly equipped, as you can see."

I still couldn't make out what sort of contact Tompson could expect to make with the aid of helicopter and aerosleigh. Zernov smiled enigmatically.

"The news boys don't either. But Tompson is no fool. He didn't corroborate a single statement attributed to him by the press concerning the aims of the expedition or the means with which they hope to attain them. Queried by journalists, not a single firm supplying him with equipment and gear has responded. He has been asked whether he is taking along tanks with gas of an unknown composition. Other questions: What are the instruments recently loaded onto a vessel at Copenhagen to be used for? Does he intend to explode, drill or break into the force field of the extra-earth-lings? His reply is that the equipment of his expedition was checked by customs officials and that nothing was found to violate the rules for bringing it into Greenland. He knows nothing, he insists, about any special instruments that were said to have been loaded at Copenhagen. The aims of the expedition are scientific-research and he's going to count his chicks when they hatch."

"Where does he get the money?"

"Don't know? There's no big money here, even the 'mad men' of politics aren't ready to place big sums at his disposal. He's not fighting communists or Negroes. Of course, somebody is financing the thing, without a doubt. Some news-

paper syndicate they say. Like Stanley's expedition to Africa. A sensational piece is playing, why not risk it."

I wanted to know whether his expedition was connected with some kind of decision or recommendation of the Congress.

"He's broken with the Congress," Zernov explained. "Even before it started he announced in the press that he does not consider himself bound by its future resolutions. By the way, you don't even know what happened there."

That was so, I didn't know what had happened at the Congress. I didn't even know that it had taken place at the very time that I was being removed from the operating table to my post-operative ward.

After the Security Council of the United Nations refused to discuss the phenomenon of the rose clouds prior to a resolution of the Paris Congress, correctly taking the view that the first word should come from science, the atmosphere around the Congress became extremely heated.

It opened up like a world football championship. Trumpets, flags of the nations, greetings from all scientific associations of the world. True, the wiser ones kept quiet while the less cautious participants came out with statements that the mystery of the rose clouds would be clarified in the near future. Of course, there was no discovery of any kind, with the possible exception of Academician Osovets' report. He advanced and substantiated the thesis that the visitors were peace-loving beings from space, and this set the course for other scientists. Pieces of wisdom were bandied about. Zernov told me some of them

with hardly containable disappointment. Opinions collided and hypotheses rose and fell. Some of the conferees even took the 'clouds' to be varieties of flying saucers.

"Yuri, if you only knew how many dopes there are in science, people who have long since lost the right to be called scientists!" said Zernov. "Naturally, there were some well-thought-out speeches, and original hypotheses, some bold conjectures. But Thompson left after the very first meetings. 'A thousand shy oldsters won't cook up anything worth while,' he said to waiting newspaper men."

Out of the entire Congress, he invited to this expedition only Zernov together with the crew of the 'Kharkovchanka' and Irene. "We began together, we'll continue together," said Zernov.

"I didn't begin," interrupted Irene.

"But you continued."

"Where?"

"On that same night in the hotel Homond."

"I don't get it."

"Ask Anokhin. He'll tell you a thing or two."

"About what?" Irene was concerned.

"That you are not you but your model created by the 'clouds' on that ill-fated night."

"Quit joking, Boris Arkadievich."

"I'm not joking. Simply Anokhin and Martin saw you in St. Disier."

"Not her," I put in, "you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten, but I figured it would be better not to tell."

A nervous extended pause set in. Irene took off her glasses, collapsed the bows automatically and again opened them—the first sign of nerves.

"Now I understand," she said accusingly to Zernov, "that you and Martin were hiding something from me. What was it?"

Zernov evaded the question this time as well.

"Let Anokhin tell you. We believe that he is the only one who has the right to tell you."

I replied to Zernov with a glance the force of a sword stroke by Bonnaville. Irene turned to him, then to me in a state of complete confusion.

"Is that true, Yuri?"

"Yes, it is," I sighed and said nothing.

To tell her what had happened in the officer's casino in St. Disier I had to be alone with her, not here.

"Something unpleasant?"

Zernov smiled. The pause continued. I was really pleased to hear the familiar creak of the door.

"The most unpleasant thing is to begin right now," I said and nodded in the direction of the opening door, through which my angel in white with hypodermic needle in hand was coming. "This is part of the treatment that even friends are not supposed to view."

And the curative therapy of Professor Peletier again pushed me down into the abyss of sleep.

Chapter XXVI

THE CONGRESS

I woke up the next morning, promptly recalled everything and got mad as hell: I still had another day in the hospital. The appearance of my

white angel with a wheeled table containing my breakfast did not console me in the least.

"Turn on the radio."

"We have no radio here."

"Then get me a transistor set."

"Out of the question."

"Why?"

"Everything is prohibited that can interfere with the normal well-being of a convalescent patient."

"I'm already well."

"You will know about that only tomorrow morning."

The white angel was fast turning into a demon.

"But I've got to know what is taking place at the Congress. Zernov is speaking. Don't you understand? Zernov!"

"I do not know Monsieur Zernov."

She handed me a folder in red morocco.

"What's this?"

"Newspaper clippings that Mademoiselle Irene left for you. The Professor allowed them."

That was bread for a person starving from lack of information. I opened the folder, forgetting about breakfast and listened. Yes, I listened.

It was the voice of the world coming through to me, through nickel and glass, through the white brick of the hospital walls, through the murk of bottomless sleep and the beatitude of getting well. It was the voice of the Congress with the opening speech of Academician Osovets that set the right course for a reasonable and consistent stand of humanity relative to the visitors from space.

"What is already clear?" said the Academician. "That we are dealing with an extraterrestrial civilization, one from another planet. That its technical and scientific level far surpasses our own. That neither they nor we have been able to establish contact with one another. And also that its attitude towards us is friendly and peaceful. During these three months the visitors have collected and transported out into space the ice of all the continents and we have not been able to intervene. What does this action spell for humanity? Nothing but good. Climatologists will establish the precise consequences of what has been done, but even now we can speak of a considerable amelioration in the climate of the polar and adjacent moderate latitudes, about the mastering of vast earlier inaccessible areas and of a free settling of the population of the world. What is more, the extraction of the terrestrial ice was accomplished without geological catastrophes, floods or other natural calamities. Not a single expedition or ship or scientific research station operating in these areas of glaciation suffered. More, the guests presented humanity, as a by-product, with newly discovered riches that were soon located. In the foothills of the Yablonevy Range, they discovered vast deposits of copper ore, in Yakutia fresh diamond deposits. In the Antarctic they discovered oil and in their own way drilled and put up rigs of a very peculiar design quite unfamiliar to any of us." He concluded in a burst of applause with the following words. "I can say to you that right now in Moscow an agreement is being signed among interested countries on the establishment of an

industrial and trade stock company, with the code name SJEAP, which stands for Society for the Joint Exploitation of Antarctic Petroleum."

Academician Osovets also summarized the events connected with the spacelings' modelling of phenomena in terrestrial life in which they were interested. The list was so long that the speaker did not read it. It was simply issued as a printed supplement to the report. I will cite only what was commented on by the journalists at Paris.

In addition to Sand City, the "horsemen" modelled a resort town in the Italian Alps, the French beaches in the morning, when they resemble the mating grounds of seals, the square of St. Mark in Venice and a portion of the London underground railway. Passenger transport systems attracted their attention in many countries. They dived into trains, ocean and air liners, police helicopters and even balloons participating in some kind of sporting contest at Brussels.

In France they penetrated to some kind of racing event at the Parisian cycle racetrack, in San Francisco, it was a boxing match of heavyweights for champion of the Pacific Coast, in Lisbon, at a football game for the Cup of European Champions (the players later complained that the red fog around them was so thick that they could not see the opponent's goal). The fog was the same during the games of the first round at the interzonal chess tournament in Zürich, and for two hours at the Government Cabinet meeting in the South African Republic, and for forty minutes the animals in the London Zoo dined. The newspaper gibed that both events

occurred on the same day and that in both cases the fog did not disperse either the beasts or the racists.

The Academician's list included a detailed enumeration of all the factories and plants modelled by the cosmic visitors completely or partially: sometimes a department, or a conveyor line, or simply a few machines and tools characteristic of a given type of production and chosen with unerring precision. Parisian journalists commenting this choice came to some curious conclusions. Some said that the "clouds" were interested mostly in outmoded types of machines that had not changed fundamentally over the past century, and therefore least comprehensible to them, such as the filigree working of precious stones or the designations of kitchen utensils. Then a diamond-cutting shop in Amsterdam was modelled and a primitive manufactory of toys in Nuremberg.

Other observers, commenting on the list of Osoverts, noted the interest displayed in services for the consumer. Wrote the correspondent of the "Paris-Midi": "Have you noticed the quantity of modelled barbershops, restaurants, fashion houses and television studios? Note the attention paid to the choice of shops, stores, market places, fairs and even show windows. And note the variation of modes of modelling. At times a "cloud" will dive onto a site and leave immediately before there is time for a natural panic to develop. At other times the cloud envelopes the objective slowly, imperceptibly penetrating to every nook and cranny, and people do not notice anything until the density of the gaseous cloud turns into visibility. And even then there

is something that prevents them from altering their customary behaviour, something that represses the mind and will power. Nobody experienced fear: barbers cut hair, clients leaf through illustrated journals, movie cameramen make takes or conduct TV shows, the goalkeeper snatches a difficult ball, and a waiter politely hands you the bill in the restaurant. Everything round about has become red like the light of a red lamp, but you continue your activities, only later realizing what has occurred after the 'horsemen' have passed beyond the horizon carrying with them your live imagination. Most of the time you don't even have a chance to see it: the cosmic visitors demonstrated it to humans only during the first experiments in fixation of terrestrial life. afterwards everything was confined to films of red gas of varying consistency and tonality."

"Nobody has suffered during all of this, and nobody has even had any material losses of any kind," thus the Academician summarized. "With the exception of a stool that vanished together with a double at a meeting of polar men at Mirny, and the automobile of pilot Martin who rashly left it in the modelled city, no one can name a single thing destroyed or damaged by our cosmic friends. There was talk of a cycle that was left by a Czech cyclist and disappeared near Prague during a race, but it was later found in a parking lot during a rest period. Then there was an alpenstock taken away from a Swiss guide, Fred Schomer, by his double who suddenly appeared in front of him on an Alpine path-

way. But Fred Schomer wrote to the editors saying that nothing of the kind had taken place, that firstly, he was so frightened he threw it away, and secondly, the same stick was returned to him by the rose cloud that dived to the front door of his house. All of the other cases reported in the press turned out to be simply the idle imaginings of self-styled 'victims' or of the newspaper men themselves. The rose clouds returned to space without having done any harm to humanity and without taking anything with them except terrestrial ice and the conjectured recordings of terrestrial life coded in some fashion in red fog. This, incidentally, is a hypothesis that has not been proven in any way by anybody."

Academician Osovets' speech met the approval of far and away the bulk of the delegates. I did not read Tompson's speech, it had found no support, and actually the debate turned into an exchange of queries and replies, not in the least polemical and not even very bold or confident. There were apprehensions for example that the peaceful nature of the newcomers was only a manoeuvre and that they would return with quite different intentions.

"What kind?" the Academician would like to know.

"Aggressive."

"With the technological facilities at their disposal what purpose is there in camouflage?"

"But suppose it's reconnaissance?"

"The very first encounters have demonstrated to them the difference in our technical potentials."

"But have we shown them our potential?"
Tompson asked.

"They've modelled it already."

"But we didn't even attempt to direct it against their attack."

"How can you call that an attack?"

"However, can you risk asserting that it will not follow?"

"In support of my assertions I cited numerous proven facts, while in support of your contentions I hear only hypotheses."

After that ignominious discussion—that is, for the opponents of the Soviet Academician—the "doubters", as they were dubbed, fought back in the commissions, especially in the Commission for Contact and Conjecture that soon became famous for its tempestuous sessions. Here, all manner of hypotheses were advanced and straightway venomously countered. One discussion merged into another, very often gradually straying farther and farther from the original topic. This continued until the electric gong of the chairman sounded. The journalists did not even work up their notes or inject any hyperbolas, all that was needed was to cite verbatim.

I took at random one of the clippings and read:

"PROFESSOR O'MELLY (Northern Ireland): I suggest an amendment to the formulation of Professor MacEdou: ammonium and fluorine.

PROFESSOR MACEDOU (USA). I agree. That was mentioned at the press conference.

PROFESSOR TAINE (Great Britain). As I remember it, at the press conference it was suggested that the rose clouds were visitors from a

cool planet. For fluorine beings, a temperature of minus one hundred degrees would be only a pleasant frost. I do not want to put it strongly but any first-year college student would be able to correct the colleague who made that statement. The problem of fluorine proteins. . . .

VOICE FROM THE BACK OF THE AUDITORIUM. There's no such problem.

TAINE. No, there isn't, but there easily could be. The commission here is one of conjectures and not scientific facts.

VOICE FROM PRESS CENTRE. Boy, this is boring.

TAINE. Why don't you go to a variety show if you don't like it? Organo-fluorine compounds are activated only at very high temperatures. Or has my colleague forgotten the difference between plus and minus? Fluorine life is life based on a background of sulphur and not water. On 'hot' planets, professor, and not cold planets.

MACEDOU (*jumping to his feet*). Who's that talking about water or sulphur? Professor Dillinger, who is absent, had in view hydrogen flouride. I am not surprised that he was misunderstood by newspaper reporters, but what surprises me is the incomprehension of an outstanding scientist. It is precisely hydrogen fluoride or fluorine oxide that can be the 'viable solvent' at temperatures of not plus but minus one hundred and more degrees. The rose clouds might also be visitors from a cold planet, gentlemen.

VOICE FROM BACK OF AUDITORIUM (*speaker hides behind the man in front of him*). At what temperature, Professor, do they cut kilometre-thick layers of ice?

TAINE. Another point in favour of the hot planet.

PROFESSOR GWINELLI (Italy). More likely in favour of the hypothesis of gas-plasma life.

TAINE. It is difficult to believe that even in extraterrestrial conditions gas could serve as a medium for biochemical reactions.

GWINELLI (*heatedly*). What about the famous experiments of ~~Miller~~ who succeeded in synthesizing elementary organic compounds in a gaseous medium? And the investigations of the Soviet Academician Oparin? Carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and hydrogen are to be found in any corner of the universe. And these elements, in their turn, form compounds that carry us up the ladder of life, including the jump from the non-living to the living. Then why should we not conjecture that it is precisely in a gaseous medium that a life originated that has risen to the heights of a supercivilization?

CHAIRMAN. Can you formulate your idea within the framework of the hypothesis?

GWINELLI. Of course.

CHAIRMAN. Let us hear Professor Gwinelli at our next session. . . .

VOICE FROM BACK OF AUDITORIUM (*interrupting*)... and Dr. Schnellinger who is now in Vienna. He has a well worked out hypothesis of intercommunications of the cosmic beings, something in the nature of direct frequency modulation, irradiation of ultrashortwave impulses and even the possibility of telepathic transmission via gravitational waves. . . .

LAUGHTER NEARBY. Nonsense!

VOICE FROM BACK OF AUDITORIUM (*persistently*.) Excuse me for any innaccuracy in the formulations, specialists will understand.

Professor Janvier in black silk cap rises. He is the oldest professor of the famous French Polytechnical School. He holds on to his hearing aid and speaks into the microphone.

JANVIER. Esteemed ladies and gentlemen. I would leave Dr. Schnellinger's report until we have heard the hypotheses about those with whom we are dealing: with living beings or highly organized biocybernetical systems. In the former instance, direct telepathic communications might be possible.

"I am not in possession of them, but there are apprehensions that all these hypotheses are simply ingenious fabrications," concluded the Parisian observer. "The number of hypotheses presented at the sessions of the commission has already topped the hundred mark. . . ."

I took another clipping from another verbatim report, but chosen with the same humorous intentions and commented on in the same style. In the third one, the author recalled Gulliver and condescendingly pitied people who could not be like Lilliputians that do not concoct hypotheses. However, after Zernov spoke, there was not a trace of any ironic condescension. When I opened up the evening papers Irene brought me, their solidarity this time was quite different.

"Riddle solved!", "Russians Penetrate Mystery of Rose Clouds," "Anokhin and Zernov Establish Contact with Visitors", "Soviets Again Surprise the World". Such were the headlines on the story about the conversion of modern Paris into the pro-

vincial town of St. Disier of the time of Nazis occupation, about the marvellous materialization of the movie plots of a famous producer and about my clash with the first swordsman of France. The latter was what captivated Paris completely. An ordinary cameraman and amateur fencer crossed swords with Mongeusseau himself. And stayed alive, that's what's important. That evening Mongeusseau was interviewed a number of times and got his salary doubled for participation in the film. Newspaper reporters squeezed Mongeusseau and Carresi dry and then attacked Peletier's clinic; only the strict monastery regime there relieved me of yet another press conference. Zernov was lucky. Taking advantage of the ritual accompanying the opening and closing of Congress sessions, he slipped away and grabbed the first available taxi to get out of town and visit a communist Mayor, an acquaintance of his.

I did not find anything new in his report, which was given in detail and with commentary. Everything had emerged clear-cut from our discussions about what we had experienced. Yet the comment of even the most conservative portion of the press was extremely flattering to us all.

On the first page of the "Paris Jour", next to photographs of myself, Zernov and Martin, I read: "Two Russians and one American lived through a fantastically thrilling night in a Paris hotel, a night that recalled to life all the nightmares of a Gothic novel. By far not every person instantaneously jerked out of the present world and plunged into the world of materialized dreams and apparitions extracted from the depths of someone else's memory would behave

with such fearlessness, orientation in his new surroundings and reasonable sequence of actions. This can be said of all three participants of this fantastic Odyssey. But Zernov must be singled out as the one who did the most. Boris Zernov was the first of the scientists of the world to give the only possible answer to the query that has been exciting thousands of millions of people on this planet Earth: why the visitors ignore our attempts at contact and they themselves do not seek communication with us. Zernov's answer is that there is a far greater difference between our physical and psychical life and theirs (perhaps immeasurably greater) than, say, between the organization, the biological organization, and the psychic make-up of a man and a bee. What would happen if we attempted to ~~contact bees~~—they with their media and we with ours? Then is contact possible between two still more diversified forms of life? We have not found it, they have. They need not have shown us the models of their world, yet they did. Why? In order to get to know our physical and psychic reactions, the nature and the depth of our thought processes, our capacity for understanding and evaluating their actions. They chose worthy Argonauts, but only Zernov proved to be Odysseus: he comprehended the gods and out-tricked them."

I read that article with such relish that Irene couldn't contain herself any longer and said:

"I wanted to punish you for hiding things. Well, okay, I'll show it to you."

And she showed me an opened cable from Umanak, Greenland.

"PARIS. Congress. Zernov. Heard your report by radio, staggering. Perhaps here in Greenland you will make a new discovery. Expecting you and Anokhin next flight. Tompson."

That was my happiest day in Paris.

Chapter XXVII

IMAGINATION OR PREDICTION

And most likely not only mine. Particularly when I told Irene.

At first she did not believe me. She grinned like a girl on her first date.

"You're just joking."

I said nothing, then asked her:

"Your mother was in the Resistance movement. Where?"

"Our Foreign Office asked the French, and they don't know for sure. Her whole group perished. And it's not known where or how."

"In St. Disier," I said. "Not so far from Paris. She was an interpreter in the officer's casino. That's where she was captured."

"How do you know?"

"She told me so herself."

Irene slowly took off her glasses and folded the bows.

"You don't joke about things like that."

"I'm perfectly earnest. Martin and I saw her that night in St. Disier. We were taken for English pilots; their plane had been shot down in the night on the outskirts of the town."

Irene's lips were trembling. She couldn't even ask the question she wanted to.

Then I related the whole story from beginning to end, about Etienne and Lange, about the burst of gunfire Martin fired on the staircase of the casino, the explosion that we heard in the dark town.

She was silent. I got angry, realizing all the helplessness of words that were powerless to reproduce life, even a model of life.

"What did she look like?" Irene asked of a sudden.

"Who?"

"You know."

"She continually changed depending on the person that recalled her. Etienne, or Lange. She was young, about your age. They both admired her, though one betrayed her and the other killed her."

She said very softly:

"Now I understand Martin."

"That's much too little as punishment."

"I understand." She thought for a moment and then asked, "Am I like her in any way?"

"A real copy. Remember the surprise on the face of Etienne in the hotel? And the concentrated attention of Lange? Ask Zernov, he'll tell you."

"And what happened afterwards?"

"Then I walked up the stairs of the Hotel Homond."

"And everything vanished?"

"Yes, as far as I was concerned."

"And as far as she was concerned?"

I spread my arms in a helpless gesture. How could I answer?

"I do not get it," she said. "There's the present and the past. And life and what else?"

"A model."

"A living one?"

"Don't know. It might be recorded in some way or another. On their film." I laughed.

"Don't laugh. This is terrifying. Living life. Where? In what kind of space? In what kind of time? And do they carry it away with them? Why?"

"Listen," I said, "I haven't enough imagination to keep up with you."

But there was a person who had all the necessary imagination. We met him the following day.

In the morning I was discharged from the clinic and said a masculine farewell to the as-always stern Peletier ("You saved my life, Professor, I am in your debt"), embraced the senior nurse—my white angel with the devilish needle ("It makes me sad to have to say goodbye, Mademoiselle") and in response came the highly non-nunish, almost Maupassant, "Naughty boy" and I went out onto the Voltaire Embankment where I was to meet Irene. The first thing she told me was that Tolya Dyachuk and Vano had left Copenhagen and were flying to Greenland direct, and that my visa and Zernov's were being processed in the Danish Embassy. I could still be present at the plenary session of the Congress.

The heat outdoors was awful, the asphalt melted under one's feet, but in the corridors and halls of the Sorbonne where the Congress was being held since all the students were away on vacation, it was cool and as quiet as a church

after services. And just as empty. There were no late comers or eager smokers or avid gossipers or argumentative thinkers. All the smoking rooms and refreshment places were empty. Every one was gathered in the auditorium where there wasn't room for even one more person—never so packed. People were sitting everywhere, even on the floor in the aisles, on the steps of the uprising amphitheatre. That's the only place we could find.

At the lectern was an American. I gathered that from the way he swallowed separate letters and put too much stress on "o" and "a" just like my English teacher at the institute. She had studied at Princeton or Harvard. I knew his name, like all the reading world; but this was no statesman, not even a scientist, which would have been in full accord with the composition of the assembly and the list of its speakers. This one was a writer and not even a very fashionable one—simply a science-fiction writer that had made a name for himself. Actually, he did not take any great pains to substantiate scientifically his amazing concoctions, and even here, in front of a galaxy of prominent scientists, had the nerve to state that he personally was not interested in scientific information about the cosmic visitors that the Congress was putting together bit by bit with great difficulty (those were the words he used), but the fact of an encounter between two utterly different worlds with what are actually two incompatible civilizations.

It was this statement and the hum of the auditorium that followed it signifying either agreement or disagreement (hard to say) which we

heard as we found our seats on the steps in the aisle.

"Don't be offended by the word 'bit', gentlemen," he continued with a slight grin, "you will collect tons of information of the highest value in the commissions of glaciologists and climatologists, in special expeditions, at scientific-research stations, in institutes and scientific papers, all of which will be concerned with problems of new formation of ice, climatic changes and the meteorological consequences of the phenomenon of the rose clouds. Yet the mystery of them still remains a mystery. So far we do not know a thing about the nature of the force field that has paralyzed all our attempts at an approach to them, or about the character of the life that we have encountered, or about its location in the universe.

"The conclusions of Boris Zernov about an experiment of the newcomers to establish contact with earth-dwellers are interesting, but that is their experiment and not ours. Now I can offer a counter-proposal, if the occasion arises. To consider the world that they create as a direct channel to their consciousness, to their thinking process. To speak with them via the 'doubles' and 'spirits' which they create. And use every one of their models, every ultimate substance (structure) that they materialize, use them as a microphone for direct or indirect communication with the cosmic people. Something in the nature of a telephone conversation without mathematics, chemistry or other codes. And in simple human speech, English or Russian, it makes no difference, they will understand. You

may say that that is science fiction, and I say it is too. But the Congress has already risen—note that I say ‘risen’ and not ‘come down’—to the level of genuine scientific fiction; actually, I do not insist on the word ‘science’, it is the fiction, the fantastic portion that I stress, when the imagination foreshadows the future (*noise in the hall*). Scientists are polite people! Say it louder: sacrilege in the temple of science! (*Cries of ‘sacrilege, of course’*). Just a bit of fairness, gentlemen. Now tell me, was it really scientists that predicted television, the videophone, lasers, Petrucci’s experiments and cosmic flights? Those were all the inventions of science fiction to begin with.

“I did not miss a single session of the conjecture commission and at times I was truly amazed at what I heard, for it was fantasy of the purest water. Explosions of imagination. The hypothesis of a hologram, wasn’t that imagination? The visual perception, by the spacemen, of any object by means of reflected light waves? This kind of photorecording is perceived as a three-dimensional representation and has all the optical peculiarities of a natural landscape. Yesterday’s report about painted icebergs in the Bay of Melville at the shores of Greenland corroborates this hypothesis. The icebergs were painted red by a Danish expedition vessel, the ‘Queen Christina’ in full view of the ‘horsemen’ galloping across the sky. They were moving at an altitude of several kilometres, yet from shipboard the unaided eye could not detect the slightest trace of colour at a distance of a hundred metres, yet the ‘horsemen’ went into a dive, first

washed away the paint, and then extracted from the water the chunk of pure blue ice. In this way, the conjecture that the spacelings have super-vision became a scientific fact.

"Not all imagination represents prediction or foreshadowing of events, and not every hypothesis is reasonable. For instance, I wish to reject the hypothesis of the Catholic Church that the newcomers are supposedly not living beings endowed with reason, but artificial creations of our brethren 'in the image and being of God'. Actually, that is the same religious formula concerning God, the Earth and Man, in which the concept 'Earth' is extended to encompass the whole Universe. Philosophically speaking, this is simply playing up to naive anthropocentrism, which can readily be refuted even on the basis of those 'bits' of knowledge that we have already gathered concerning the rose clouds. If their creators were humanoids, then when sending their cybernetic constructs into cosmic scouting expeditions, they would undoubtedly be trained for the possibility of an encounter with beings of outward similarity if not humanlike intelligence. Properly programmed, these biorobots would readily find a common language with earthlings, and human life would not appear to them to be such a deep mystery. No, no matter what the theologians and anthropocentrists claim, we have come face to face with a different form of life, an unfamiliar form that we have yet to comprehend. Most likely, this is a mutual necessity, but that does not alleviate our situation in any way. Try to answer, for example, the question of how our visitors from other worlds

live, of whether they are immortal or simply long-living; then for how long and how far away from us? How do they reproduce, how is their life organized biologically, socially, and in what medium—liquid or gaseous—do they develop; perhaps they do not need any medium and live as blobs of energy isolated from the external medium by fields of force. I appeal to your imagination, gentlemen: try to answer! (*Noise in the hall, applause*). That is a vote of confidence, I take it, and the science-fiction man can continue, is that right?"

I notice how the chairman involuntarily looks at his watch and his hand reaches for the bell button. But a roar of clapping and shouts in a variety of languages of "let him speak" bring him to a halt and he does not press the button.

"Speaking here, Boris Zernov mentioned the human being and the bee as an instance of two incompatible forms of life. Let us whip up our imagination. Let us switch the example around. We have an encounter of, say, a supercivilization of bees and a human civilization lagging behind by millenia. Observers have already noted a certain functional difference in the behaviour of our cosmic visitors: they cut ice, others transport it out into space, a third kind establishes the atomic scheme of the model, and a fourth type creates the model. Accordingly, there are differences in the structural forms of the constructors: one kind stretches out like a band saw, others blow up into an enormous flower-like something, still others emerge as a red fog, and still others condense into a cherry-like jelly. The question now arises: are we not dealing with a swarm, a highly devel-

oped swarm of beings with their specific functional development? Incidentally, life in a beehive is organized somewhat differently from the dwelling houses on Park Avenue in New City or in Moscow's Cheryomushki district. Both as to work and rest. But do they need rest? Have they any feeling for beauty? Have they music, say? What do they do for sports? That's what I ask. Try to answer those questions. It's like chess, like going through variants. Difficult of course. But that is precisely what a grandmaster does.

"What strikes me as strange is why the grandmasters of science have not yet asked themselves the most important thing of all: the reason for these spacelings coming to visit us (*agitation in the hall*). Everyone has the answer, I know, even two answers. Some—about 90%—are sure that they came to earth for terrestrial ice, which might be a unique type as far as isotopic composition goes in adjacent space. The minority, led by Tompson, believe that this is a reconnaissance expedition with aggressive aims for the future. Personally, I believe that the scouting took place earlier, we simply missed it. This time, it is a powerfully equipped expedition (*apprehensive silence in the auditorium, only the buzzing of journalists' tape-recorders is heard*), but not of conquerors, gentlemen. They are colleagues studying a form of life with which they are not acquainted. (*Shouts of: "But the ice?"*). Wait a minute, you'll have your ice. That is a sideline operation. The important thing is we ourselves. The ~~highest~~ form of protein life ~~based on water~~. Something seems to be hampering them here on Earth in their study of this life. Perhaps the

environment but maybe fear of upsetting it. What is there to be done? Start with God, with the creation of the world. (*More noise in the hall, and shouts of "Shut up, blasphemer"*). I am no more a blasphemer than the father of cybernetics, Wiener. In his day, there were those who screamed: "This is of the devil!" He encroaches on the second commandment! 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. . . .' And now you are building robots and dreaming of an electronic brain. The idea of constructing a model of our life in all its richness and complexity is natural for these beings, for what is cognition if not modelling by means of thought? And the transition from mental model-building to material modelling is only one step of progress. There will come a time and we will be doing that. Some even say when: next century. So why shouldn't some supercivilization of cosmic beings have attained that much earlier, say by one thousand years?"

The writer fell silent, took a gulp of soda water and stood thinking. The audience waited. No one coughed, no one got uneasy, no one whispered. I was never present at a lecture that was listened to with such reverent attention. He was silent, and his glance, as if severed from everything about him, seemed to be groping for some distant-distant thing, inaccessible to all except him.

Then he started again ever so softly, though no one missed even so much as the intonation: "If it is possible to build a model of life, it is possible to carry it away; record it and then set it up somewhere else in one's own vicinity and establish a nutrient medium for its development. What is needed for this purpose? An artificial satellite, an

asteroid, a planet, a model of the terrestrial atmosphere and of solar radiation. But principally water, water and more water, without which protein-based life is an impossibility. Therein lies the meaning of transporting terrestrial ice in quantities sufficient for supplying a whole planet. It is then that deep within our galaxy (or perhaps even some other galaxy) there will emerge a new world, not a repetition but a similarity, and one with the most subtle kinship, for all the models of these spacepeople are flawless and precise (*Remark: "A cosmic zoo with human-like at large!"*). Quite naturally, there will be such as the person who just spoke (*laughter*). But I would correct him, not a zoo but a laboratory. Or, to be more exact, a scientific institute where human life would, in all its complexity of psychic, social and everyday aspects, become the subject of a profound, careful and considerate study. It would of course be studied. That was the purpose of making experiments, but it would be studied and not meddled with, studied in development and in motion forward and grasped in motion. And if once this motion were comprehended, there might be some way of refining and accelerating it. I think I've said all I need to. That is my hypothesis. Object if you wish. Like any hypothesis newly born of the imagination, it can of course be readily refuted. Yet I am pleased to think that somewhere in the depths of the universe there lives and moves a piece of our life, even though only a modelled, synthesized piece, but created for a great idea—the closer understanding of two civilizations that are at present very far removed from one another, the

basis for this better understanding having been laid here on the Earth. And if the space people return, they will return with an understanding of us, they will be enriched by such a comprehension, we will have given them something, and they will know what need be given us on this mutual pathway towards perfection."

The writer bent forward slightly in a bow and left the lectern. Silence followed in his wake, a silence much more eloquent than any storm of applause.

Chapter XXVIII

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THE VIOLET SPOT

We cut out something like a foxhole at the very edge of the plateau of ice that had apparently been cut by a gigantic knife. The shiny pale blue section that reflected just as blue a sky with not a cloud in sight fell from the height of a five-storey house. Actually, this was not a cut but a gouge, a broad excavation of about three hundred metres in diameter that stretched beyond the horizon. Its ideally even and straight structure resembled the bed of an artificial canal prior to entry of water. The empty canal cut in a mass of ice came right up to a violet spot.

In the solid wall of cold blue fire it darkened like an entrance way or an exit. Not only a snow tractor, even an icebreaker of medium proportions could freely pass through it without touching the uneven pulsating sides. I aimed my camera and spent a few tens of metres of film on it and

then switched out. The spot was like any other, no miracles!

But the wall of blue fire far exceeded all the wonders of the world. Picture to yourself the bluish flame of an alcohol lamp illuminated further from behind by the steady rays of the sun hanging just above the horizon. The brilliant fire growing blue in the light, next to it another one, and at a short distance the snaking outline of a third, then a fourth, and they all merge into a flat even flame in contact with one another along the faces of some kind of marvellous flaming crystal. Now enlarge that a thousand-fold. The flames race up a kilometre in height, bend inwards somewhere in the pale blue sky, the facets blending into a giant crystal that does not reflect but captures the full beauty of this subdued sky, morning and sun. It was a mistake when someone called it an octahedron. First of all, it is flat at the bottom like the plateau on which it stands; secondly, it has numerous facets, not alike and not symmetric, but fanciful crystalline surfaces beyond which a marvellously beautiful blue gas flows and flames.

"I can't tear my eyes off it," said Irene when we approached the skating rink of blue flame. We came to within thirty metres, but couldn't get any closer because one's body grows heavier and heavier. A vertigo grasps you as if you are standing on a high precipice. The Niagara falls is magnificent, but this is beyond all comparison. It's hypnotizing.

I tried to look at the violet spot. It was fairly common even trivial—a sort of lilac satin drawn taut over an uneven frame.

"Could that be the entrance way?" Irene mused aloud. "The door to a wonder."

I recalled yesterday's conversation between Thompson and Zernov.

"I told you it was the entrance way. Smoke, gas, all that sort of stuff. They passed through it single-file. I saw it myself. And now we've passed through."

"Not you, but a directed shock-wave."

"What's the difference? I have demonstrated to them that humans are capable of thinking and of drawing conclusions."

"A mosquito finds an opening in a net and bites. What kind of proof is that of any ability to think and draw conclusions?"

"You know, I'm fed up with this talk about mosquito civilizations. We are a true civilization and not one of bugs and ants. And I think that they comprehend as much. And that is already contact."

"Too costly. One person has paid with his life."

"That was an elementary accident. Perhaps the wiring was wet or something like that. A lot of things happen. A worker with high explosives is no gardener. I say that Hanter died due to his own lack of caution, he could have jumped into the crevice; there was time enough. Then the reflected shock-wave would have passed over him."

"They've reflected it again."

"The second one. The first got through, don't forget. But Hanter could have made a second mistake by not calculating the direction properly."

"It would be more correct to say that they themselves calculated both the force of the charge

and the direction of the wave. And deflected it."

"Let's try something else."

"What for instance? They are not sensitive either to beta or gamma rays."

"How about a laser or a jet of water? An ordinary hydraulic excavator. In itself, any change of means of penetration to the violet spot and beyond would, in our view, make them sit up and think. And that means contact. Or at least the preliminaries of contact."

Tompson's new weapon was brought almost up to the very "spot"; they were separated by no more than fifteen metres. The force field was not apparent even in this microregion. From my photography site on top of the plateau, the hydraulic excavator resembled a grey cat readying itself for a jump. Its streamlined metallic surfaces shimmered dully on the background of snow. The English mechanic was making a last check on some kind of clutch and contacts. Two steps from him was an indentation cut in the ice the size of a human being.

Irene was not with me. After the death of the demolition worker she refused to be present at "suicides" organized and paid for by a maniac whose place is in an insane asylum. The "maniac" himself, together with Zernov and other advisers, delivered the signals from their headquarters by telephone. The headquarters was located a short distance from me on the plateau in a hut made of thermally insulated blocks. A corrugated metal tank rose up alongside. Big chunks of ice were fed to this tank and the melt water entered a hydraulic excavator. Technically spea-

king, the expedition was conceived and executed flawlessly.

I too was ready with my camera aimed. Ready! Shoot! A flash of the pencil-thin jet pierced the gaseous curtain of the "spot" without encountering any resistance, and then vanished beyond it, as if severed at the base. Half a minute later, the ultra-high-speed jet shifted, slashed through the violet mirage at an angle and vanished again. Even in a high-power pair of binoculars I could not detect the slightest change in the structure surrounding the "spot", either in the diverging rings, or in the turbulent or laminary flows, which might have been produced by the impact of the hydrojet in an allied medium.

This did not last more than two minutes. Then, of a sudden, the "spot" slowly crawled upwards, like a fly on a blue curtain. The hydrojet met the scintillating blue, did not pass through it, but split into two parts, like a jet of water from a fire hydrant crashing into a window. That very instant the water built up into a whirling twister that was not deflected to the side, but curled downwards to the ground. I am not positive about the accuracy of my description. Specialists who later viewed the film found some regularities in the motion of spray, but that's the way I saw it.

I continued photographing for a while, and then quit, figuring that for science that would be enough and for the general public, more than enough. But at that instant the water jet was switched off: Tompson, apparently, had realized the experiment was pointless. Meanwhile, the "spot" crawled upwards, ever upwards, until it

vanished at aircraft altitude beyond the curve of the enormous blue tongues curled inwards.

That was the most impressive thing I observed in Greenland—out of a great number of impressive items. First the marvellous aeroport at Copenhagen, the multilayered Danish sandwiches aboard the plane, and the colours of Greenland as we approached from the air—the perfectly white ice plateau to the north, the black level stretch off to the south, from which fresh ice had been excavated, the dark red promontories of the coastal mountain ridges and the blue of the sea that blended into the dull green of the fjords. After that came a coastwise voyage on a schooner northwards to Umanak. That's where Wegener's* famous expedition started out on its last lap.

Already on the schooner "Akiuta" we found ourselves in an atmosphere of general turbulence and unaccountable exhilaration that gripped the entire crew, from the captain to the cook. Since we did not know a single Scandinavian language, we wouldn't have learned a thing if our only companion, Dr. Karl Petersen from the Danish polar station in Godhaven, did not turn out to be a very communicative person with an excellent knowledge of English.

"Have you ever seen our fjords before?" he asked over a cup of coffee in the mess room. "No? The wind drives the sea ice even in July. There have been ice fields up to three and even five ki-

* A German expedition which in 1930-1931 explored the thickness of the ice cover in the central and northern regions of the continent. Wegener died a tragic death during his last wintering over season.

lometres across. In Godhaven, half the harbour is covered with ice the year around. Caravans of icebergs descend from the glaciers of Uperniwik and farther north. The whole of Baffin Bay has been clogged up with them like a traffic jam on a highway. No matter where you look, there are always two or three in your field of view. That was before. Now, not a single one about in a whole day of sailing. And notice how warm it is. Both the water and the air. Have you noticed how upset the crew is? They're talking of going into commercial fishing. Herring and cod are now coming from Norwegian waters in huge schools. From the air, they say, you can even see them near the eastern fjords. Do you picture it on the map? What is our eastern shoreline? Jammed both winter and summer because all the Russian Arctic ice gathers there. Where is the Arctic ice today? On Sirius? The 'horsemen' have fished it all out clean. Incidentally, why are they called 'horsemen'? Those that have seen them say they're more like balloons or dirigibles. I haven't had any luck that way, haven't seen any at all. Perhaps they'll put in an appearance during our trip, or maybe at Umanak."

But we did not encounter any of them either during the trip or at Umanak. They appeared here before when they began excavating glacial ice that was descending into the waters of the bay. Then they left behind them an ideal canal bed cut out of the ice about three hundred kilometres long back into the interior of the continental plateau. As if they knew that they were going to follow their route from Umanak, where Wegener's expedition crawled along on sleighs

over gravel frozen into the ice. We had at our disposal a marvellous highway of ice, broader than any speedway in the world, and a cross-country vehicle on caterpillar tread ordered from Düsseldorf. Our crew was Antarctic, but the vehicle was smaller than the "Kharkovchanka" and neither as speedy or as tough.

"There'll be trouble enough with it, you'll see. One hour of travel, two of waiting," said Vano, who had just received a radiogram from Thompson's headquarters stating that two other Sno-Cats of the expedition that had started out 24 hours ago had not yet arrived at their destination. This is driving us mad. There's nothing to buy here. Syrup in place of sugar. Lucky, we brought flying boots, otherwise you'd have to wear camiki—Eskimo footwear of dogfur—with grass. Every previous Greenland expedition had worn those unpleasant boots. Vano was completely indifferent to the surrounding scenery painted so remarkably by Rockwell Kent. Tolya even looked at Irene reproachfully for her admiration of the Gothic in the Umanak mountains and of the colours of the Greenland summer, which for some reason reminded us of Moscow summers in the countryside.

"Clear as daylight," Tolya explained, "the line of cyclones has shifted, no snow. July winds. Don't whine Vano, we'll get there without mishap."

But adventures began hardly three hours after we got started. We were stopped by a helicopter sent by Thompson. The Admiral was in need of advisers and wanted to speed up Zernov's arrival. Martin piloted the helicopter.

What he related was fantastic even for us who were used to the mysterious doings of the "horsemen from nowhere".

On this helicopter, Martin made a survey of the latest trick of the cosmic visitors—blue protuberances merging at high altitudes in the form of a multi-facet roof. As always, the rose clouds appeared suddenly and from nowhere, as it seemed. They passed over Martin without paying any attention to him and vanished in the violet crater somewhere near the edge of the cover. That is where Martin headed his craft.

He landed on a violet pad and did not find any support. The helicopter kept on descending, freely penetrating the lilac-gray cloudy medium. For about two minutes visibility was nil, and then Martin's machine found itself hovering over a city, a large modern city but with a limited horizon. The blue cupola of the sky covered it, as it were, like a hood. There was something familiar in the city, as far as Martin could see. He descended a bit and then piloted his craft along the central street that cut the city in two from one end to the other and recognized it at once—Broadway. This seemed so preposterous that he rubbed his eyes. No, this was Broadway all right. Forty-second street over there, then the station. A bit closer was Times Square, to the left the canyon of Wall Street. He could even make out the church, the famous millionaire church. Martin was able to pick out Rockefeller Centre and the Huggenheim Museum and the enormous towering Empire State Building. From the observation platform, tiny figures of tourists were waving handkerchiefs, down in the streets below

were multicoloured automobiles crawling along like ants. Martin turned in the direction of the sea, but something prevented him from advancing. Then it dawned on him that it was not he who was piloting his craft—invisible eyes and hands were doing the job for him. For another three minutes or so he was taken over the river, which appeared to be cut by the cupola of the sky. Inside, the blue radiance gave the appearance of a summer sky illuminated by a sun that had just sunk below the horizon. Then he was over Central Park, had almost reached Harlem, but at that moment he was being pushed upwards through a denseless lilac-coloured cork into the natural atmosphere of the earth. That is how he got back into the normal sky together with his craft, above the city now hidden in a blue flame. At once, he sensed that the helicopter was in his control and ready for action. Martin then went in for a landing at the site of the camp of the expedition.

We listened avid for information and did not interrupt with a single word. Then Zernov, after some thought, asked:

“Have you reported to the Admiral?”

“No, I haven’t. He’s queer enough as it is.”

“Are you positive you saw everything well? No mistake? Nothing confused?”

“You can’t mistake New York. But why New York? They never even came close to it. Anyone ever read about a red fog in New York?”

“Maybe they did it at night.” I suggested.

“Why?” objected Zernov. “We already know of models built up from visual samples, from im-

prints of the memory. Do you know the city in detail?" he asked Martin.

"I was born there."

"How many times have you walked the streets?"

"Thousands of times."

"That's it. You walked about, observed and got accustomed. Your eye recorded and your memory stored away the recordings. They went through the recordings, selected the ones they wanted and reproduced them."

"Does that mean that that is my New York, the way I saw it?"

"I'm not positive, they might have modelled the psyche of a number of New Yorkers, including yours too. Kind of a jigsaw puzzle. Large numbers of little pieces of cardboard are put together to form a picture, a portrait, a scene. And that's the way they did it: thousands of visual impressions are assembled into something that actually exists, but as viewed and remembered by different people in different situations. I think that the Manhattan reconstructed in the blue laboratory of the cosmic-men is not exactly the true Manhattan. In some way it must differ from the real thing. In details, in points of view. The visual memory rarely portrays things exactly as they are, it creates. And the collective memory is still more material for creativity. Jigsaw puzzle creativity."

"I'm not a scientist, sir," said Martin, "but that is surely impossible. Science is not capable of explaining it."

"Science..." and Zernov sniggered. "Our ~~science here on~~ earth does not yet allow for the

|possibility of a repeated creation of the world. But in the distant, the far distant, future it will finally provide for such a possibility."

After Martin's story, everything appeared to me routine and common until I saw and filmed the blue protuberances and the violet spot. The fresh wonder of the cosmic people was just as extraordinary and inexplicable as all the earlier ones had been. Those were the thoughts that clamoured for my attention as I returned to the camp.

As I approached, Irene came running all excited.

"Yuri, Tompson wants to see you, hurry up. The Admiral has called all the members of the expedition. A Council of War."

Chapter XXIX

THE JIGSAW PUZZLE

We were the last to arrive and immediately sensed the atmosphere of curiosity and apprehension. The urgent, extraordinary nature of the meeting as it came straightway after the experiment indicated that Tompson was undecided. He who was so used to making decisions alone was now overanxious to get a collective view. He now wanted the opinion of as many people as possible.

The meeting was conducted in English. Those who didn't understand sat closer to their neighbours for a running translation.

"The experiment has been a success," Tompson began without any introductory words. "They

have already gone over to the defensive. The violet entrance way has been shifted to the upper facets of the cupola. In this connection I will try to use something new. From above and from the air."

"A bomb?" someone put in.

"And what if it is?"

"You haven't got any nuclear ones," Zernov remarked coldly. "And you haven't any conventional high explosives either. The best you can do is a plastic bomb to blow up safes or cars. Whom do you think you will frighten with such toys?"

The Admiral shot a brief glance at him and parried:

"I am not speaking of bombs."

"I advise you to tell him, Martin," said Zernov.

"I know," the Admiral put in. "Directed hallucinations. Hypnomirage. We'll try someone else, not Martin."

"We have only one pilot, sir."

"I do not intend to risk the helicopter. I need parachutists. And not simple ones, but..." he screwed up his mouth looking for the right word, "say, ones that have already had dealings with the spacemen."

We exchanged glances. Zernov was out because he was no sportsman. Vano had hurt his hand during the last trip. I had parachuted twice in my life, but without any pleasure either time.

"I would like to know whether Anokhin would be able to perform that operation," Tompson said.

I was angry.

"It isn't a matter of being able to, but one of wanting to, Admiral."

"You mean that you do not have that desire?"

"You guessed it, sir."

"How much do you want, Anokhin? A hundred? Two hundred?"

"Not a cent. I do not get pay for the work I do in the expedition, Admiral."

"It's all the same, you obey the rulings made by your superior."

"According to regulations, Admiral, I photograph what I consider necessary and provide you with one copy of the photo. What is more, a cameraman does not necessarily need to know how to jump with a parachute."

Tompson again screwed up his mouth and asked:

"Maybe someone else will do it?"

"The only jumping I ever did was in an amusement park in Moscow, from a tower," Dyachuk said in Russian, looking at me reproachfully, "but I'll risk it."

"I will too," Irene added.

"Don't try to outdo all the big boys," I cut in.

"This is no operation for girls."

"Nor for cowards either."

"What's the talk about?" Admiral Tompson asked after patiently waiting for our dialogue to end.

I got in ahead of Irene:

"About forming a special unit, Admiral. Two of us will jump: Dyachuk and Anokhin. Anokhin will be in charge. That's all."

"I see I was not mistaken," the Admiral smiled.

"You are a man with character, just what

we need. Okay. Martin will pilot the plane." He looked round the room. "That will be all, gentlemen."

Irene rose and at the exit turned round:

"You are not only a coward but a provoker too."

"Thanks."

I did not want to argue, but what I definitely did not want to do was to allow her to get into what might possibly be another St. Disier.

We were briefed before the flight as follows:

"The aircraft will ascend to two thousand metres. It will come in from the northeast and will descend to the target to an altitude of two hundred metres, right over the entrance. There is no danger. The only thing under you will be a stopper made of air. Everything will be all right as soon as you get through it. Martin did not freeze and he was able to breathe comfortably, so I think you will too. Good luck."

The Admiral looked each one of us over and, as if in some doubt, added:

"If anyone is afraid, he can refuse. I do not insist." I looked at Tolya. And he looked at me.

"Getting nervous," Tolya said in Russian. "He's already relieving himself of the responsibility. How are you?"

"And you?"

"Ironclad."

The Admiral listened to the unfamiliar language and did not utter a word.

"We exchanged some impressions," I said dryly. "We're ready for the mission."

The aircraft rose from the plateau of ice and headed east gaining altitude. It skirted the pul-

sating protuberances. Then banked and took a sharp turn back, falling all the time. Down below was a boiling blue sea that did not heat. The violet entrance way was clearly visible—a lilac-coloured patch on blue velvet—and seemed as flat and as hard as the ground. For a moment it was frightening—jumping from such a low altitude. We wouldn't be able to collect our bones afterwards, as the phrase goes.

"Don't be afraid," said Martin. "You won't get bumped. It's rather like the foam on beer, and coloured too."

We jumped. First Tolya and then I followed. Both parachutes opened up without mishap, Tolya's a rainbow of colours underneath me. I saw him go into the violet crater and slip through as if it were a swamp—first Tolya and then his colourful umbrella. For another moment it was again frightening. What was beyond the murky gaseous shutter—ice, darkness, death from impact or lack of air? I was still guessing when I plunged into something dark and not very perceptible, something without temperature, without odour. Only the lilac colour turned a familiar red. Absence of sensitivity to the medium passed into body sensations as well—I couldn't see my body nor feel it, as if I had dissolved in the gas. The sensation I had was that only my mind, not my body, only my consciousness was floating in this incomprehensible crimson foam. There was nothing at all about, no parachute, no shroud lines, no body, nothing, I wasn't even there.

Then all of a sudden, as if struck in the eye—the blue sky and a city below. At first indistinct and then barely distinguishable in the haze;

then the city came closer and we could see it more clearly. Why did Martin call it New York? I was never there, and had not seen it from an airplane, but I did have an idea of what it should look like. This one was quite different, no Statue of Liberty, no Empire State Building, no skyscrapers, no canyon-like streets. No, this was definitely no Bagdag over the \Subway that O'Henry had described, no City of the Yellow Devil penned by Gorky, and no Iron Mirgorod as described by the poet Yesenin. This was a different city, and one much more familiar to me, though I still couldn't make it out. But I had the feeling that I would in just a minute, just a minute!

And I did. Beneath me was an enormous letter A, constructed in three-dimensional space. The lacework of the Eiffel Tower could be seen rising into the sky. Away from it to the right and left was the twisting and turning-greenish hand of the Seine River, a mix of sparkling silver and green lawns in the sun. The green rectangle of the Tuileries Park was sure proof that this was real and not illusory green. To many, rivers seen at a height appear to be blue, but to me they are green. This green Seine twisted to the right to the Ivry and to the left to the Boulogne. I immediately felt where the Louvre could be, and the turn of the river and the island Cite. The Palace of Justice and the Notre Dame cathedral appeared from above like two stone cubes in hazy outline, but I recognized them. I even glimpsed the Arch of Triumph on the famous square from which a dozen streets radiate.

"How was it that Martin had gotten things so

wrong?" I asked myself. I am no expert on Paris and had seen it from an airplane only once, but I concentrated as I observed the city before landing. And the same day I went over what I had seen by telling Irene my impressions as we walked about the town. We didn't have time to cover much ground and see so very much, but what we did I firmly fixed in my memory. Then an idea came to me: "Perhaps Martin was not mistaken after all. He simply saw New York and I was witnessing Paris. In both cases, it was a hypnomirage, as Tompson had termed it. But why did these beings need to impose all manner of hallucinations? Based on place of birth? That is where the strongest memories are sited, yet I was not born in Paris, but in Moscow, and what I see is the Eiffel Tower and not the Kremlin. It might be that the "clouds" choose what has been recalled from the recent past; yet Martin, so he says, hasn't been in New York a good ten years. What was the logic behind these two different movies they had us view? And again doubts plagued me: maybe, after all, this is no film, no mirage or hallucination. Could it be that in this enormous laboratory whole cities are actually reproduced, cities that had made great impressions on the cosmic beings. And how are they reproduced, materially or mentally? And for what purpose? Is it to comprehend the city as a structural form of our being? As a social unit of our society? Or simply as a living and multifaceted, vibrant chunk of human life?

"It's all crazy," said Tolya.

I turned around and saw him hanging next to me, two metres away, on the taut shroud lines

of his parachute. Hanging it was, not falling, or floating or being carried by the wind; simply fixed motionless in that strange unmoving air. Not the slightest breeze, not a single cloudlet in the sky. Only pure ultramarine of the heavens and beneath us a familiar city. There we were at an altitude of a kilometre and a half, suspended inexplicably from rigidly fixed shroud lines, motionless. We were in air, for we breathed freely, at least as freely as Camp Eleven near the summit of Mt. Elbrus.

"Martin gave us the wrong impression," Tolya added.

"No, he didn't," I said. "He was telling the truth."

"Then he made a mistake."

"I don't think so."

"Then what do you see?" Tolya was worried.

"What do you see?"

"Why, the Eiffel Tower, naturally. I can surely recognize that."

So Tolya was looking at Paris. The hypothesis of hypnohallucination specifically tailored to the subject under study had to go.

"Still this is not Paris. It's not the real thing," said Tolya.

"Nonsense."

"Where do you find mountains in Paris? The Pyrenees are far enough away and the Alps too. So what are those?"

Turning to the right I saw a chain of wooded slopes rising to snow-capped rocky reddish peaks:

"Those might be Greenland hills," I suggested.

"We're inside a cupola. There are no moun-

tains round about. Did you see any snow-capped peaks? There aren't any left anywhere on the Earth."

I took another glance at the mountains. Between us and the cupola lay a blue strip of water. Was it a lake or a sea?

"What's that game called?" Tolya asked suddenly.

"What game?"

"You know, when you piece together pictures and things."

"Oh, a jigsaw puzzle."

"How many employees were there in the hotel, not counting the visitors?" Tolya began to muse. "About thirty. Now were they all Parisians? There must have been a few from Grenoble. Or from some place where there are mountains and the sea. Everyone has his own Paris and an added piece of his hometown. Now if all that is put together it will not produce a model. Anyway, not a true one."

He repeated Zernov's idea, but I was still doubtful. Then it's a game of building blocks. Today we build, tomorrow we disassemble. Today it's New York and tomorrow it's Paris. Today Paris with Mont Blanc and tomorrow with Fujiyama. Why not? Surely what has been created on the earth by nature and man is not the limit of perfection. Could it not be that a fresh creation of things would improve matters? Could it be that this laboratory is searching for the typical in terrestrial life? Maybe the typical is here being verified and tested? It could easily be that what for us is a mix-up is for them the goal they are seeking.

Finally, I was thoroughly confused. The bulging parachute hung above me like the roof of a street café. The only thing lacking were tables and bottles of lemonade. I noticed it was hot. There was no sun, but it was stiflingly hot.

"Why don't we fall?" Tolya asked suddenly.

"Didn't you ever finish school or did they kick you out of the fifth grade?"

"No, really, I'm serious."

"And I am too. You've heard of weightlessness, haven't you?"

"One floats in a state of zero gravity, here I can't even move. And the parachute is stiff as a piece of wood. What's holding it?"

"Not what, but who."

"Why?"

"Just being polite. Hospitable hosts are giving a lesson in manners to unwanted guests."

"Then what's Paris here for?"

"It might be the geography they like."

"Yes, but if we suppose they are reasonable..." Tolya exploded.

"I like your 'if'."

"Quit the joking, I'm serious. They must have some purpose."

"That's right. They record our responses and this conversation too, for instance."

"You're impossible," was Tolya's concluding remark and then—we were jerked from our position by a gust of wind and found ourselves flying over Paris.

At first we descended some two hundred metres. The city was close and every detail clear-cut. We could see black smoke with greyish streaks billowing out of factory stacks. Big barges

on the Seine and motor boats of all colours plying the waters. A worm crawling along the Seine turned into a train approaching the Gare de Lyon, and the roiling blur on the streets turned into a colourful mosaic of summer suits and dresses. Then we were thrown upwards and the city began to recede and melt in the distance. Tolya went up higher and vanished together with his parachute in the lilac-coloured plug. In another two or three seconds I whirled into it too. Then the two of us, like dolphins, swished over the facets of the blue cupola. In the process, neither of our parachutes changed its shape at all, as if unseen and unperceivable air currents were carrying us along to the white sheet of the glacier.

We landed more slowly than in an ordinary parachute descent, but Tolya fell and was dragged along the ice. While I was getting out of my shroud lines, Thompson and the others from the camp were already approaching. His jacket was unbuttoned, he was in boots that he hadn't had time to lace up, without a hat—he looked the perfect hockey coach.

"How was it?" he asked imperiously.

I never liked that tone.

"Everything's normal," I said.

"Martin signalled that you both had emerged from the plug."

I shrugged. Why had they kept Martin in the air? How could he have helped us if we had emerged from the plug in a difficult situation?

"What's it like there?" Thompson asked finally.

"Where?"

(You'll have to wait, Mister, you're going to have to wait.)

"You know where, come on, out with it."

"Yes, I do at that."

"Well?"

"It's a jigsaw puzzle."

Chapter XXX

A BET

We returned to Umanak. That is, our Antarctic expedition plus the engineering and scientific personnel of the expedition and two tractor vehicles—our quarters—and a caravan of sleighs with all the equipment. The helicopter had already returned to the Arctic Base in Thule, and our commander together with the apparatus that could be put on board an airplane had already taken off for Copenhagen.

That is where the last press conference took place at which he refuted all his official and private statements about the successes of the expedition. In the radio shack we tape-recorded for posterity that gloomy exchange of questions and answers from Copenhagen. We cut out all the noise and laughter and remarks and left only the backbone of queries and replies.

"Perhaps the Commander will first start out with an official statement."

"It will be brief. The expedition was a failure. We were unable to bring to successful completion a single scientific experiment. I was not able to determine either the physical or chemical nature of the blue light, nor was I able to find out anything beyond it. I refer to the space enclosed by the protuberances."

"Why?"

"The force field surrounding the region of the luminescence proved impenetrable to our technical facilities."

"You speak of the facilities available to the expedition, but is it impenetrable to all the potentialities of terrestrial science?"

"I do not know."

"Reports have appeared in the press, however, concerning the possibility of penetrating it."

"What exactly do you mean?"

"The 'violet spot'."

"We saw several such 'spots'. It's true that they are not protected by a field of force."

"Did you try to enter them?"

"Yes, we did. And we couldn't do it. In the first case, a directed shock wave, in the second an ultra-high-speed water jet."

"What were the results?"

"No results at all."

"How did one of the members of the expedition perish?"

"That was a simple case of negligence. We took into account the possibility of a reflected wave and warned Hanter. Unfortunately, he did not take advantage of available covering."

"We have heard that the pilot of the expedition was able to get inside the cupola. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is."

"Why does he refuse to speak? Open up the secret."

"There is no secret. It is simply that I have not allowed any release of information concerning our work."

"We don't understand why. Please explain."

"Until the expedition is dismissed, I alone am responsible for all the information."

"Who, besides Martin, was able to get beyond the limits of the blue light."

"Two Russians, the cameraman and the meteorologist."

"How did they do it?"

"By parachute."

"How did they get back."

"The same way."

"Parachutes are for jumping downwards, not upwards. Did they use a helicopter?"

"No, they did not make use of the helicopter. The force field stopped them, ejected them and landed them."

"What did they see?"

"Ask them when the expedition has been dismissed. I am sure that all that they saw was a hypnotic mirage."

"For what purpose?"

"To embarrass and frighten mankind. To instill the idea of the immense capacity of their technology and science. To a certain extent, I was convinced by Zernov's speech at the Paris Congress. All of their superhypnosis is a manner of contact, but the contact of future colonizers with future slaves."

"Were the pilot and parachutists also embarrassed and frightened?"

"I'm not so sure. Those boys are tough."

"Do they concur in your opinion?"

"I have not insisted that they do."

"We've heard that the pilot saw New York and the Russians saw Paris. Some say that that is a true model, like Sand City."

"You've already heard my opinion. What is more, the area of the blue light is, after all, not large enough to build two cities like New York and Paris in it."

ZERNOV COMMENTS: "The Admiral has misrepresented the facts somewhat. It is not a question of construction, but of reproduction of visual images that the cosmic men were able to record. It's like a montage photograph. Certain things are selected, reviewed and fitted together. It was simply that our boys and Martin had the luck to get into the laboratory through the back door, so to speak."

That's the way we passed the time on the way to Umanak. It was the most remarkable road in the world. We haven't got the machines that could produce such a smooth surface. Still, the tractor vehicle came to halt because one of the treads needed fixing and the engine began to act up. Vano did not explain why. He only said: "That's what I told you, we'll have some real trouble." An hour later, after our partner Sno-Cat and its caravan of sleighs had long since vanished in the distance, we were still under repair. Incidentally, no one paid any attention to Vano and there were no complaints. I was the only one who paced about, lost in thought and getting into everyone's way. Irene was busy concocting an article for the "Soviet Woman" magazine. Tolya was engaged in drawing fanciful charts of air currents caused by the warm-up; Zernov was, as he put it, getting together material for a scientific paper, perhaps for a new dissertation.

"A second doctoral dissertation?" I asked in surprise. "What for?"

"No, it's not for a PhD, a candidate's dissertation."

I was positive he was joking, but he looked at me with pity: a good mentor always pities his weak-minded pupils.

"My science," he explained patiently, "has been rejected by the present, and it'll be too long to wait for the future. I won't live that long."

I still didn't understand.

"Why?" In a couple of winters there'll be ice again in the Polar regions."

"The process of ice formation," he interrupted me, "is a familiar thing to every school child. What I am interested in is the thousand-year-old continental ice. You say it'll get cold again and there'll be ice. Of course there will. During the past half a million years there were at least three ice invasions, the last one about twenty thousand years ago. Do you expect me to wait for the next one? And even if I could, where would it come from? There is no more hope from the deviation of the earth's axis. No, old boy, there are no two ways about it, I'll have to change my speciality."

"To what?"

He laughed.

"It won't be far away from the 'horsemen'. You may say that there is more that's hypothetical than experimental. Well, there is. But as the cybernetics people say, it is possible to find an almost optimal solution for nearly all problems." He was becoming bored, even the best of teachers give up after too much questioning. "You ought

to get out there and do some photographing, your profession is still in demand."

I picked up my camera but couldn't find anything to shoot except the last ice on the earth. Vano was welding the broken tread. A sheaf of white sparks was flying out of his work. I looked around and suddenly saw something big, a bright red chunk like an elephant standing at a distance of about a kilometre in the middle of the perfect iceway. It had beautiful fur, whatever it was. Maybe the reddish light in the distance further illuminated by the sun hanging just over the horizon, produced that colour. On the other hand, it might simply be a very large bright-red deer.

I screwed up courage and went up to Vano.

"Listen, be a nice guy, take a look down the road."

He looked.

"What am I supposed to look at, that rusty rock?"

"It's not rusty, it's red."

"All the rocks round here are red."

"Why is it in the middle of the road?"

"It's not in the middle, it's on the side. When they cut the ice, they left the rock there."

"When we came here it wasn't there."

Vano took another and more attentive look.

"Maybe it wasn't. When we get this thing going we'll see."

From a distance the stone appeared to be stationary, but the more I looked at it, the more it looked like a real stone and not a beast. Even at school I had learned that there were no large animals in Greenland. Deer? But what would a

dear find to eat on glacial ice, particularly when it was half cut away?

Vano went back to his welding and paid no more attention either to me or the rock. I decided to get closer. I had a hunch, I can't say exactly what kind, but something told me to go and find out, that it would well be worth it. And so I went. At first the stone, or the lurking beast, did not bring forth any associations. But I tried hard to recall something. It happens occasionally, you try to recall something very familiar, but all efforts are in vain. I kept on walking toward it and peering at it. Will I recognize or recall something? And finally when the red beast grew big in front of me and had ceased to be a stone, I realized that it was not a beast at all. Then I recognized it.

In front of me, across the iceway, stood our famous old Antarctic "Kharkovchanka" tractor, all purple. The most amazing and even frightening thing about it all was the fact that it was precisely our machine, the one with the bent-in front windshield and a fresh tracked snow-catcher. It was our old "Kharkovchanka" vehicle, all right. The one we went out to seek the rose clouds in, the one that plunged into a crevice and later doubled before my eyes.

I was really afraid for the first time. Was this a hypno-trick or that accursed reality? Cautiously, apprehensively, I went around the machine: everything had been reproduced with ultimate exactitude. The metal was metal to the touch, the cracks in the plexiglass were real and fresh, and the inner insulating padding on the door stuck out just a bit down below: the door

was not closed. Was this another trap, was I again in the role of an experimental guinea pig? What was going to happen? Of course, I could run back and that would most likely have been the wisest and safest thing to do. But curiosity overcame my fright. I wanted to open that door myself and feel the handle, press and hear the familiar clanking of metal and enter. I even began to guess what I would see inside. My fur jacket on a hanger, skis clamped in place and a wet floor, because the boys had tracked in snow. The half-open inner door would, as usual, creak, and the cold air from the platform would rush into the cabin with a swish.

That's exactly what happened, repeating what I had recalled a moment before. It was even funny how the details were repeated—the sewn sleeve of the jacket, the patched up rug with traces of snow that had not yet melted, even scratches on the floor caused by sleigh runners: sleighs were hauled into the cabin and then out the top hatch, because all that happened after the machine took its downward plunge. I saw the tracks when going out, and I saw my double a second time in the entrance way. Now I was seeing it for a third time. The door to the cabin creaked, and once again I hesitated whether to enter or not, my knees were knocking, my mouth was dry and my fingers were cold.

"Come on, come on," I heard a voice from behind the door, "this isn't the dentist, there's not going to be any drilling."

An awfully familiar voice, so familiar that it was impossible not to recognize it.

It was my own voice.

I pushed the door and entered the cabin where Tolya always worked and where I regained consciousness on the floor after the accident that time on the Antarctic plateau. At the table was my double, all smiles. He was positively merry, something that I was definitely not. If I had given it some thought and had been more observant, I would straightway have said that this was another person, not the one I found that time unconscious in the cabin of a tractor that had been duplicated by beings from space. This was my modern model that had probably been replicated during the short minutes I dropped by parachute into the blue cupola through the violet (or was it crimson) gaseous trap-door. The overalls I had on at the time were carelessly thrown on the couch. That was what I noticed a bit later, after I had overcome my fright and amazement. At first I simply thought this was a repetition—for what purpose I couldn't make out—of the performance in the Antarctic.

"Have a seat, buddy," he said pointing to a vacant place opposite him.

I sat down. For a moment it seemed to me a mirror in front of me, and behind the mirror my counterpart of the fairy world, my Anti-I. "What has he come to life again for," I thought. "And with the 'Kharkovchanka' vehicle as well?"

"Where do you expect me to live?" he said. "There's ice all around and nobody has yet given me a flat with central heating."

I was no longer afraid, but I was mad as hell.

"What's the idea of living at all?" I said. "What storehouse did they keep you in before resurrection?"

He gave a cunning smile, just like I do when I'm sure of my physical and intellectual superiority.

"Resurrect whom? A frightened little fool that almost goes out of his mind when he comes across his copy?"

"So he was afraid, after all," I replied with irony.

"I was a replication of you. 'Was' is what I want to stress. Now I am, I exist, get it?"

"No, I don't."

"At that time I did not know how you lived all these months, what you ate, what you read, what illnesses you had and what you thought about. Now I know. And even more than that."

"More than what?"

"I know more and I know it better. You know only yourself, and even that rather poorly. I know both myself and you too. I am a perfected model of you, more refined than your movie camera compared with the camera of Lumier."

He put a hand on the table. I touched it to find out whether he was a person or not.

"Convinced? Only more cleverly constructed."

I still had one trump card in reserve. I was now going to play it.

"Huh, some superman!" I said deprecatingly. "You were devised during my parachute jump. You know everything that happened to me prior to that time. But what about afterwards?"

"And afterwards too. I know everything. If you like, I can repeat your conversation with Thompson after landing. Also about the jigsaw puzzle, or the talk with Zernov about ice and

profession. Perhaps with Vano about the red stone?" he guffawed.

I was silent racking my brains for some kind of reply.

"You won't find anything," he said.

"What's that, you reading my thoughts?"

"Precisely. In the Antarctic we could only guess about the thoughts of one another, or to put it more exactly, about plans. Remember how you wanted to kill me? But now I know everything you are thinking about. My neuron antennas are simply more sensitive than yours. That is how I know what happened to you after you landed. Remember that (I am you plus a few corrections to nature) Something in the way of supplementary elements."

I did not experience either fright or wonderment—only the excitement of a losing player. But I still had one more trump, that is, I hoped I had it.

"Still and all, I am the real one, and you are the artificial one. I'm a human being and you're a robot. I live, while you will be disassembled."

He replied without any braggadocio, as if he knew something that I did not.

"Whether they do or they don't is yet to be seen," he added with my own mocking intonation. "It is still quite debatable about which one of us is real and which is artificial. Let's ask our friends, okay? I bet I win."

"It's a bet," I said, "but what are the conditions?"

"If I lose, I'll tell you something of interest. To you alone. Nobody present. If you lose, I'll give you the story of Irene."

"Where?" I asked.

"Here if you like. In my headquarters on this sinful earth."

I did not answer.

"Afraid?"

"I simply recalled Martin's car that vanished in Sand City, remember?"

"But Martin himself did not vanish."

"You are a more refined model than his counterparts," I replied.

He squinted his left eye the way I do and snickered.

"All right," he said, "let's see how events develop."

Chapter XXXI

SUPERMEMORY OR SUBKNOWLEDGE

Leaving our jackets on the hanger, we entered the cabin of our Greenland tracked vehicle, just as alike as the twins in the "Iron Mask". It was just dinner time when Irene, all in white, was dishing out soup.

"Where did you vanish to?" she asked without looking, then she raised her head—and dropped everything.

There was a long silence with a streak of ominous austerity. My Anti-I was not in the least disturbed however.

"That was not a stone at all, Vano, you know what it was?" he said in my own voice—so much my own that I shuddered as if hearing it for the first time. "Our 'Kharkovchanka' from Mirny. The very same replicated machine that you saw

and I photoed. Take a good look, it's out there right now. And this claimant—he pointed to me—was sitting there calm as can be waiting for us.”

I was numb from such insolence. The scene was Dostoyevskian. Mr. Golyadkin and his nimble double. I didn't even have time to object while four pairs of friendly eyes peered at me hostilely. They were not even surprised. That is the way one looks at a robber not at a ghost.

The first one to come to was Zernov.

“Since you've come to dinner, be our guest,” he said looking me over. “The situation is not new but rather interesting.”

“Boris Arkadievich,” I implored, “why the official tone? He's the double, not me. We simply bet to find out whether you would be able to distinguish us or not.”

Zernov went over us both again, somewhat longer this time, and he said:

“A real puzzle, they're as like as two matchsticks. Come on, admit which is the real one?”

“What a pity,” I said.

“Don't get excited,” said my reflection, “we're both real.”

It seemed to me that a spark of understanding flashed in Zernov's eyes when he turned to the speaker and then again to me.

“Let's begin, comrades,” he invited everyone to the table and said softly to Irene, “add another place, please.”

“I've even lost my appetite,” I said. “Again codfish?”

That was the wrong thing to say. The Anti-I attacked immediately.

"There you are, Irene, now which one of us is Yuri Anokhin? Which one of us ordered pea salad this morning?"

I had actually spoken to her about it, and had forgotten. Skipped my memory completely. I only noticed how gratefully Irene looked at my counterpart. The game was going in his favour.

"We'll make a check on this through the use of a familiar method," said Zernov, looking again and again from one of us to the other.

"It won't work," I said exasperated, "he knows everything I did and thought during that accursed interval between creation and appearance. He himself said that his neuron antennas are far more sensitive than mine."

"That's what you said," my Anti-I put in.

I felt like throwing into his face the cold soup that I didn't want to eat anyway. Too bad I didn't because he added like a pistol-shot:

"Incidentally, doubles do not eat, because they do not have a digestive tract."

"You're lying, Anokhin," said Zernov. He was now on an official footing with both of us.

"But we haven't verified it, Boris Arkadievich," my Anti-I put in without losing any time, "there are a lot of things we have not yet verified. For example, the memory. So you say your antennas are more sensitive," my tormenter said turning round to me. "Let's check and see. Remember the contest in Russian literature in the ninth grade?"

"In the days of the Tsar Kosar?" I wise-cracked.

"That's where I failed, on that Tsar. Remember on what? The third quote."

I did not remember either the first or the second or the third. What Tsar? Peter? From the "Copper Horseman"?

"Your antennas are malfunctioning. It's from 'Poltava', Mr. Golyadkin."

The bastard was reading my thoughts, and I was losing. Could it be that I had forgotten so much?

"I don't know whether you've forgotten everything or not, but you certainly don't remember the epigraph to 'Fiesta', right?"

I didn't remember it.

"I insisted that that was your favourite book."

"From Gertrude Stein," I recalled.

"And the text?"

I was silent.

"So you're going to wait until I mentally repeat it? You don't recollect anything, you simply remove my own recollections from my memory cells." Anti-I turned to Tolya and said, "Ask him, Tolya, ask him something easier. Let him try to work his memory."

Tolya thought a moment and then asked:

"Remember our talk about the monsoons?"

"Where?"

"In Umanak."

"Did we talk about monsoons? I haven't the slightest idea about them. Some kind of winds is all I know."

"What did you say at that time?"

What did I say? Christ, I couldn't remember a thing, even under torture.

"You ask me," said the other Mr. Golyadkin triumphantly, "I said that since childhood I have confused monsoons with trade winds."

I recalled the way Agatha Christie finishes her novels, when Hercule Poirot unmasks the criminal, who sits crumpled up under the cross fire of interrogation. That was the way I felt at this damned dinner.

And then suddenly at the height of triumph of my tormenter, Irene looked at me thoughtfully and said: "You know, Yura, you're terribly like him. So much so that it's awful."

That's the way things go. There are football games when some insignificant little player that nobody ever pays any attention to all of a sudden shoots in a terrific goal that wins the game, and there isn't even any yelling in the stands. They only look in amazement at the "wonder". That was exactly the way four pairs of eyes, again friendly, turned on me.

This time Anti-I did not parry the blow, he waited. Very calmly, and it seemed to me even indifferently to what was going to follow. Could it be that I too had such cold and empty eyes?

"Personally, I guessed these two apart quite some time ago, and I figured out which was Yura," said Zernov turning to Irene. "But what is it that convinced you?"

"Memory," exclaimed Irene. "It's the memory," she repeated with conviction. "A human person cannot remember everything. Inessential things are nearly always forgotten, blurred in one's memory, all the more so that Yura is on the absent-minded side. But this one remembers everything: crazy contests, conversations, quotations. An inhuman memory."

Anti-I remained silent. He looked at Zernov

as if he knew that that one would deal him the last irresistible blow.

And Boris Arkadievich did.

"I was convinced by one sentence." He motioned with his elbow to my counterpart. "'We are both real.' Remember? Our Yuri and in fact anyone else would never have said a thing like that. Each of us would have been confident that he was the real one, and the duplication, the model—the synthetic entity. Our Antarctic doubles that were modelled with great exactitude would have reasoned in the very same way, for they did not know that they were simply copies of human beings. But one of these two knew that. Both that he was the duplicate and that the model was in actuality indistinguishable from a human. He alone could have said 'We are both real'. He alone."

Applause broke out and Anti-I applauded as well.

"Bravo, Boris Arkadievich! That was an analysis worthy of a scientist. There is nothing to counter it. I am indeed the model, but a more refined entity than you, who are nature-made. I have already mentioned that to Yuri. I freely perceive the impulses of his brain cells. To put it more simply, I know all of his thoughts and in the same fashion I can transmit to him my own thoughts. Likewise, my memory is not human, not yours. Irene grasped that at once. That was my next mistake, I could not keep it a secret. True enough, I remember perfectly what Anokhin has done, said and thought during all the years of his life, in early childhood, yesterday and today. That is not all. I remember everything that he

has read and heard in the recent past—in other words I remember the entire body of information that he has received and processed concerning the rose clouds and the attitude of humanity towards their appearance and conduct. I know by heart all the newspaper clippings that Anokhin has read and studied about the Paris Congress. I can recite word for word any speech, remark or conversation behind the scenes that has in some way reached Anokhin. I remember all of his conversations with you, Boris Arkadievich, both in actuality and in the synthesized world. And what is most important, I know why all this supermemory of mine was needed and why it is associated with the second synthesization of Anokhin.”

Now I looked upon him with gratitude. My tormenter had vanished and this was friend and companion on the way into the unknown.

“So you knew from the very start that you were synthesized?” Zernov asked.

“Of course.”

“And you knew when and how?”

“Not exactly. The very first instant that I came to in the cabin of the ‘Kharkovchanka’ vehicle I was already Anokhin, but I also knew that there exists another one besides me and I also knew that the difference was between us. I was programmed in a different manner and with other functions.”

“What kind?”

“First of all, to make my appearance and tell you.”

“About what?”

“That the second synthesization of Anokhin is

connected with the information that he obtained and processed concerning the attitude of humanity towards the phenomenon of the rose clouds."

"Why was Anokhin chosen for this purpose?"

"It may be because he was the first one to undergo a psychic study by the cosmic beings."

"You say 'may be'. Is that your conjecture?"

"No, a slip of the tongue. I know it."

"From whom?"

"From no one. I simply know it."

"What does 'simply' mean? From what sources?"

"They are within me myself. Like hereditary memory. There is a great deal that I know, simply know from nowhere at all. The fact that I am a model, about my supermemory, about two Anokhins. And about the fact that I must retain and convey all the information that he has accumulated."

"In order to transmit it to whom?"

"I do not know."

"To the space beings?"

"I do not know."

"I can't figure out your 'know' and 'do not know'." Zernov was quite obviously irritated, which was not typical of him. "How about the facts without the mystic background?"

"Nothing mystic here," sneered my Anti-I condescendingly. "~~Knowledge is the quality and quantity of information obtained and processed.~~ My knowledge has been programmed, that is all I would call it subknowledge."

"Perhaps also subconsciousness as well?" added Zernov.

But the double declined the correction.

"Who knows about the processes that occur in the subconscious? Nobody. My knowledge is incomplete for the reason that it excludes the source, but it is knowledge nevertheless. What is suboptical speed? Nearly that of the speed of light. So also my subknowledge; it is something contrary to supermemory."

"What do you know besides the fact that you are a model?" Irene suddenly asked.

It was as if I had looked into a mirror at my own impertinent mug. But it was he, of course. And his reply was in the same manner.

"For example that I am in love with you no less than Yuri Anokhin."

Everyone laughed except me. I got red in the face. For some reason I was the one, not Irene.

She continued:

"Suppose Yuri is in love. Suppose he is even thinking of marrying me and taking me away. How about you?"

"Me too, of course."

I couldn't have said it with more alacrity.

"And where to?"

Silence.

"What are you worth when matched with Yuri," she said with a good deal of pity in her voice. "You are empty. They need only puff and you vanish."

"Yet I have a hunch . . . I feel I know something more."

"About what?"

"About my life beyond the psychic state of Yuri Anokhin."

"Is there such a thing, such a life."

For the first time my double mused and sadly gave thought to something.

"There are times when I think that there is. Or, of a sudden, something or someone within me says that there will be."

"What does 'something' or 'someone' mean?" asked Zernov.

"That which has been programmed. For example, the confidence that the person closest to the truth was not a scientist but a science-fiction writer who spoke at the Paris Congress. Or, for instance, the conviction that Zernov's conjecture about contacts is true. And the feeling that we are not quite understood—I say 'we' as a human being, do not be offended, for I am no rose cloud—the feeling that much in our life and in our psychic make-up is still obscure and demands study and that investigations will continue. Do not ask me where and how for I do not know. Do not ask me what goes on under the cupola for I have not seen. To put it more precisely, I have only seen with the eyes of Anokhin. I know one thing for certain: as soon as I have told you everything, the programmed functions will be switched off. Excuse my terminology, I am not a cybernetics specialist. And then I will be recalled." He smiled. "They are calling already. Farewell."

"I'll see you off," I said.

"Me too," Vano put in, "I'd like a glimpse of the 'Kharkovchanka'."

"It isn't there any longer," Yuri Anokhin No. 2 opened the door into the hallway. "Do not accompany me. You know what will happen to me: Yuri has shot that scene already." He

smiled sadly. "I am still a human being, and I probably wouldn't like such curiosity."

He stepped out and from beyond the doorway waved to me.

"Don't be angry at the mystification, Yuri. Or at the way I played things. As for the bet we made, I will keep it and carry out what I promised. To you alone, as we agreed."

Chapter XXXII

FOR ALL TIME!

After his departure, no one could screw up the courage to speak. The breath of death somewhere out there on the icy road had somehow penetrated to us. No matter what you say about model-building and synthesis, he was a human being after all!

"What a pity," Tolya sighed, finally. "They must be flying already. . . ."

"Cut it out," Irene put in, "stop it."

But I wanted to talk.

"If it starts up again, you'll go queasy as before," sneered Vano, probably recalling his antics in the Antarctic and added with embarrassment: "You know, Yuri, I didn't recognize you at first. The other one seemed to be smarter."

"That's what everybody thought," said Dyachuk with a mix of irony and admiration. "With a memory like a library! That's a memory I'd like to have."

"He probably wanted to live so much."

I thought, and he replied:

"What do you think I am, a log? Of course I wanted to, and right now I want to live."

Everything occurred in my consciousness. I did not concoct, contrive or imagine, I heard.

"Where are you now?" I asked him in thought.

"Out on the ice highway. It's white all about me. But there is no snow. But what difference does that make? No difference at all, right?"

"That's terrible, isn't it?"

"Yes, a little. After all I am not plastic. But don't pity me, do not think in high-flown terms about 'the icy breath of death!' Firstly, because that is a hackneyed phrase, secondly, it is not the truth."

"But you are going to vanish."

"That is ~~not death but only a transition to another state.~~"

"A state in which you are no longer."

"Why? You simply do not have any sensations of yourself, like in a dream."

"A dream passes. But in your case?"

"In mine too."

"You think you'll return?"

"Yes, sometime."

"And if you do not leave?"

"I can't but leave."

"Go on strike."

"They're stronger than I am, old man."

"What kind of a man are you then? No freedom of the will, no?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet? What does the 'yet' mean?"

"What are you whispering, Yuri, poetry?"

I must have been moving my lips. That's why Irene asked.

"He's praying," said Tolya. "He's praying to God to wipe out his duplicate. We had a cleric in our dormitory once, he was like that. He'd get drunk and whisper just like that."

"Praying, my eye," Irene said. "Let the Admiral pray, Yuri can get along with it, he's a poet. Your verses, right?"

I had to lie.

"Blok's. 'I know you, life, and I accept you and salute you with the clash of shields. . .

"Whose life?"

"What difference does it make? Even if it is synthetic life."

* * *

"That's incorrect wording," he interrupted. Orthodox thinkers can make an issue of it. Say, a live dog is better than a dead lion. That's the motto of collaborationism. You would be calling for cooperation with a hostile civilization."

"Tompson again. I'm fed up."

"They are too. They've figured it out."

"Are you conjecturing?"

"I know."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"That we'll meet again."

"Why do you say so to me alone?"

"Because that is the way the programme works. Think it over. There is no need yet to spell out all the details."

"You want to do it honestly?"

"What?"

"I don't admire it that way. Not in the least, I don't."

"Let me tell you that you're not being polite, old man."

"Listen, I'm fed up with all these miracles and tricks, right up to the ears, get me?"

* * *

"What are you whispering about?" again Irene.

"A bit off the rocker. I'd be raving if I were in his boots." That was Tolya. Zernov was silent for some reason. And nobody had noticed. No, they had.

"Why are you so quite, Boris Arkadievich? Tired of our talk?"

"No, just thinking." Zernov is always very tactful. "Real interesting experiment! Amazingly conceived: just imagine reaching for all the information they need via the person of Anokhin. Create a duplication of memory. Apparently, they are not yet capable of responding to linguistic (semantic) information directly, either acoustically, or optically. Words do not reach them, either when pronounced or written. The only information they can extract is in the form that is processed by a human brain—thoughts, mental images."

"But why Anokhin? They could take any scientist." That was Tolya of course.

"Is it really simply because he was synthe-

sized first? What significance can there be in being first?"

"The number one is of course meaningless. The importance lies in the first experiment. Yes, that's it. Too, it might be because Anokhin has a highly developed image perception. Every person has it but with varying degrees of expressiveness. The mathematician sees the world differently from the painter or the musician, and naturally, the poet has his own image of things. Say, when I mention the word 'pole', different people conjure up widely disparate images, consciously or subconsciously, with their connotations. One thinks of the North Pole, another recalls hoisting the flag, a third pictures telephone poles and erection crews. What comes to your mind, Anokhin?"

"Pole vaulting at college."

Everyone laughed.

* * *

And he laughed as well, I heard it. Not the acoustic part of laughter, but the state of the nerve cells of the brain that generates laughter.

"You laughing?" I asked.

"Certainly. Pole vaulting?" He laughed again. "The trouble I had with that pole!"

"Why you?"

"Don't ask silly questions. Incidentally, Zernov very correctly perceived the necessity of imagery in receiving information."

"Did you listen into our conversation?"

"Through you I did. I respond to all the in-

formation that you process. Invisibly I am present at all your conversations."

"Actually, I myself am not listening to everything."

"You're not listening, but you hear. And I store all that up in my memory. By the way, listen to what's going on. Our Boris Arkadievich is talking about that right now."

* * *

"... a lot is accumulated in a memory store of such kind. And a trained memory can extract a great deal at a moment's notice. Generally speaking, a 'supermemory' is not a miracle. Recall Arago, what a phenomenon! And chess players? Fantastic professional memory. If we only knew its code and the mechanism of storing facts..."

"Do you think they know?"

That was Irene again. Rather unbelieving for some reason, and even with a touch of irony. But Zernov did not notice the sarcasm, he was in dead earnest.

"I am convinced. It may be that Anokhin is simply a successful experiment. But they'll find out for sure. Somewhere among themselves."

"You believe that hypothesis too?"

"Why not? Is it worse than any of the others? Just as many points for it as against it. What is more, it does not degrade human beings, rather elevates them. The final link of contact and mutual study and, as a consequence, of an exchange of information between two cosmic civilizations."

"Did you hear that? Our Boris Arkadievich is real smart. The last link. True enough. The lacking link."

"You believe that hypothesis too?"

"I'm not saying yes or no."

"Why?"

"It's too early. I do not yet have a free will. But the time will come. . . ."

I found that amusing.

"Mysticism again. I'm beginning to have doubts about your other-world existence."

"Well, do you believe in saltations from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom? We could formulate it that way, if you like. Freedom of one's will. Freedom of thought. Freedom of creativity. Is there any reason why we should not repeat the path you have traversed?"

"Then maybe the dreamer is right after all. A planet, some Earth Number Two, will appear somewhere with our water, with our air and our cities?"

"You can joke through anything. Nobody knows what will appear and where. Investigation does not always mean repetition, more often it represents a search."

"For what? Synthesized dreams? A super-memory?"

"These are all trials, my friend. Only trials. We live in a world of constants. Nature has long since created optimal dimensions and forms for terrestrial conditions and protein life. So why change the constants?"

* * *

I must have said that aloud because Zernov smiled and replied:

"Naturally, why should it?"

I flushed. How would I account for my "thinking aloud" and about what? Vano saved me.

"Perhaps we ought to get a move on, Boris Arkadievich, what do you think?" he said. "The engine's working and the road's smooth, a race-track you might say."

Zernov looked at me sharply:

"What do you think, is it time to leave?"

"What did he mean by 'time'? I wonder whether he understood what was going on."

* * *

"He's known for quite some time. And you know that he knows. Don't make believe. You can tell them: 'It is time'. Anokhin the Second is ready to leave."

"Don't torment me."

"Well, it is time. I am far away, they are close."

* * *

I suddenly felt weary, depressed, my throat constricted, I found it hard to breathe. I no longer saw anyone or anything, except the distant traveller in the white field.

"So this is the end."

"Not the end. Only till our next meeting."

"But will there be a next meeting?"

"No doubt about it."

"There or here?"

"Don't know, Yuri. What I don't know, I don't know. The point is that it will be not only you and me that will meet. We and they. Remember how he finished his speech at the Congress? 'And if they return, they will return with an understanding of us, they will be enriched with a comprehension of what to expect from us and with a knowledge of what to proffer us on this mutual advance towards perfection.' That was well put, my friend!"

Suddenly, there was a break. I perceived a freedom of thought in no way hampered, total.

"We can go," I said to Zernov, and I felt my voice shake. I hoped he didn't notice.

"How come Anokhin's giving orders now?" asked Dyachuk.

Zernov answered, for I was helplessly weak.

"Out of the three thousand million human beings on the Earth, only Anokhin is now linked with this extraterrestrial, perhaps even extragalactic, civilization. So what will we say to humanity at large, Yuri? Is there contact, and for how long?"

"For all time," I replied.

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